OUT OF THE BLUE

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40

BOOKS BY "SAPPER"

THE FINAL COUNT
OUT OF THE BLUE
THE THIRD ROUND
JIM MAITLAND
THE DINNER CLUB
THE BLACK GANG
BULL-DOG DRUMMOND
THE MAN IN RATCATCHER
MUFTI
THE HUMAN TOUCH
NO MAN'S LAND
MEN, WOMEN, AND GUNS
SERGEANT MICHAEL CASSIDY
THE LIEUTENANT AND OTHERS

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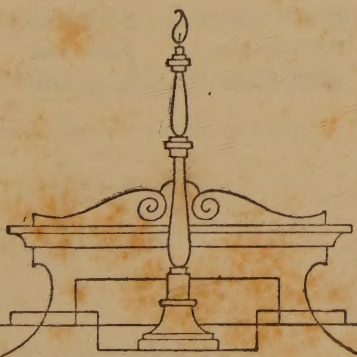
OUT OF THE BLUE

BY

"SAPPER"

AUTHOR OF
"BULL-DOG DRUMMOND," ETC.



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Basil Pender looked thoughtfully round his sitting-room. Everything was just as usual—the prints, the photographs in their silver frames on the piano, the books in the corner: they were all just as they had been for the last five years. To-morrow night also there would be no change. The same prints, the same books, the same ceaseless rumble of London traffic coming through the open window.

To-morrow night it was true he would not be there himself. It was unfortunate but unavoidable. He would have liked to have spent the first few hours after he had murdered Sinclair in the surroundings where he had so often murdered him in spirit. But it was impossible.

It was something at any rate to have been able to begin his scheme in this familiar atmosphere. It augured well for success. No undue hurry: nothing precipitate—just the quiet, orderly, working out of a carefully considered plan. And the first move in the game had already been taken.

Such a simple little move—and yet very important. It was in details of that sort where brain came in. Who would possibly attach any signi-

ficance whatever to the fact that he had removed one of his two cars from the garage where he habitually kept them both, and placed it in another, where he was quite unknown ? What had such a simple fact to do with murder ?

He smiled gently, as he helped himself to a whisky and soda. He was thinking of the conversation he had been listening to at the club only that very evening. Cresswell, of the police, had been holding forth on crime ; and an intolerable bore he was. And yet there had been a certain amount of truth in what he had said.

Undoubtedly the motive in a case of murder is the first thing for which the police look. No one but a madman commits murder without a motive. Passion, hatred, money—once the motive is established, it generally points with an unerring finger at someone. That was why Pender had left the club arm in arm with Sinclair, and walked with him part of the way to his house in Brook Street. A very normal proceeding on the part of one of Sinclair's best friends.

He'd been devilish clever about it. No one knew, no one had even the ghost of a suspicion of the deadly, black-hearted hatred he felt for the man he had just left. The world thought they were friends : even Sinclair himself thought so—damned fool that he was. It would come as a slight shock to him to-morrow when he realised the truth.

But no one else would ever know it. And in

case his plan, thought out and perfected in every little detail since he had heard that Sinclair was going down alone to his empty house in Kent—just in case it miscarried, the question of motive would never indicate him with unerring finger. He was safe on that point.

Not that the matter was ever likely to arise in this case. Before people begin talking about motive it must look as if the cause of death was murder. And he had no intention of allowing Sinclair's death to look like murder. It was to be accidental: a shocking, ghastly accident. He pictured himself hurrying back from Scotland when he heard the terrible news: comforting Enid—Sinclair's wife.

Widow, rather—not wife: Sinclair's widow. Just his card to start with: his card and a little message of tender sympathy for her in her great sorrow. Perhaps some flowers. And then after a week or so he would see her for a few minutes, and let her realise how his heart bled for her. Nothing precipitate, of course, he was far too old a stager with women for that. But in six months perhaps—or maybe a year—the time would be ripe.

Basil Pender's white teeth bared in a sudden ungovernable snarl. What waste of time! Six weeks, six minutes were too long to wait. How dared that swine Sinclair come between him and Enid? How dared he make her his wife?

The sweat glistened on his forehead, and he shook his fists in the air. Then with a great effort he controlled himself: this was a frame of mind in which he had forbidden himself to indulge. It destroyed the power of clear thought, and clear thought was essential for success. After all, the perpetration of a murder was very much like a game of chess. Move followed move, and provided no mistake was made the result was mate. And there would be no mistake in this case.

Nerve, brain, and money: given those three attributes and the thing was easy. But it was interesting—devilish interesting. The whole thing had a fascination about it which he would hardly have believed possible. Once again his thoughts drifted back to Cresswell: what was it he had been saying? He could see him now with a fat cigar between his lips, lying back in his chair and emphasising his points with a podgy finger.

"It's those unexpected, unlooked for, unallowed for, isolated facts against which no criminal can guard, however skilfully he lays his plans. He may think that he has allowed for everything—taken into account every possible contingency, then suddenly—out of the blue—comes one disconnected event, and the whole carefully-thought-out scheme goes wrong."

Well, of course, there was something in that. But the same might be said of anything in life: not

only crime. And in this case he had reduced the risk of anything unexpected happening to a minimum. There was nothing difficult about his scheme, in fact, it was extraordinarily simple. It amused him now to recall the complicated plans he had evolved in the past for killing Sinclair. For years he had hated him : from the days they were at school together he had hated him. And then, to cap everything, he had married Enid. It was that which had definitely suggested murder to his mind.

At first he had hardly treated the matter seriously. Idly he had thought out different schemes—schemes of all sorts and descriptions which had, however, one common factor. Each one of them ended in the same way—with Sinclair's death. And gradually the matter had insisted upon being taken seriously. He found himself thinking of it at all hours of the day. If he woke in the night the picture of Sinclair with Enid by his side would come to him out of the darkness.

But it is one thing to think of murder : to do it is altogether different. Murderers who get caught suffer an unpleasant fate, and Pender had no intention whatever of being hanged. And since in all his schemes the risk of his suffering that fate had been pronounced, they had remained just schemes. And then suddenly three days ago had come the idea. He had been dining with the Sinclairs, and the conversation had turned on White Lodge, their

house in Kent. It had been in the hands of the builders; new bathrooms put in, fresh papers, all sorts of improvements. And now it was empty; the workmen had gone; the keys had been returned to Sinclair.

"A darned good job they have made of it, too," his host had said. "I've got to go down there on Thursday to get a gun of mine which I forgot to bring up with me. Why don't you come down with me, Basil? I know Enid can't: she's got some show on that day. We could take down some sandwiches, and feed in the hall; and we'll test the new broadcasting set."

It had been some power outside his own that had made him answer as he did. At that moment the devilish idea had not come to him; he was only conscious of a strong desire to make some excuse to avoid spending a day alone with Sinclair. If Enid had been going it would have been different.

"Thanks very much," he had remarked, "but I shall probably be starting for Scotland on Thursday."

No more had been said: he usually did go to Scotland about that time: there was nothing strange or unusual in the fact. But when he returned to his rooms the idea had been born. He had not been going to Scotland on Thursday, but he had said so—said so in front of Enid. And Sinclair was going to White Lodge on Thursday—an empty house. He knew White Lodge well; he

had stayed there in the past. It was a desolate sort of place, half a mile from the road and surrounded by trees. Enid had wanted her husband to sell it, but it had a sentimental attraction for him, and he had compromised by having it completely done up. And suddenly there had recurred to his mind a remark he had heard her make when she first saw the house.

"It looks the sort of place where anything might happen—murder or ghosts."

Murder! Strange that she should have said that. Almost prophetic. Murder! For a moment or two he had recoiled from the thought: this was different to the fantastic schemes he had so often planned out in the past. This was the real thing: he knew that with a sort of blinding certainty even before he began to think out details. Well—what if it was? Step by step he had worked it out—discarding here, building up there. And after a while he became almost staggered with the simplicity of the thing. Surely murder must be a more complicated matter than this?

Coolly and logically he had examined every move, and could find no fault. And now once more on Wednesday night he strove to discover a flaw. It was not too late yet: he had done nothing incriminating so far. He had merely removed one of his two cars to a strange garage, and mentioned at the club that he was off to Scotland next

morning. It was perfectly easy to return the car to its usual home and change his mind about Scotland.

And the other two things—the tiny phial filled with a colourless liquid, and the four short straps now reposing in the locked drawer of his desk. There was nothing suspicious about them. No question of poison—nothing so crude as that. Poison lingers in the system, and chemists ask questions if you ask them for poison. But a strong sleeping draught is quite a normal affair; and straps of all sorts and conditions are useful for motoring.

No; there was no flaw. And with a smile of satisfaction Pender turned out the light in his sitting-room and went to bed.

It was to his permanent garage that he repaired in the morning, and five minutes later he drove away in his touring Sunbeam. He left it in Waterloo Place, and getting into a taxi he gave the address of the second garage.

"Just starting for Scotland," he informed the manager, and having settled his bill he drove round to his rooms for luggage. It was early yet for much traffic, and half an hour saw him not far from his destination—Hitchin. And in Hitchin, strange and peculiar magneto trouble occurred—due doubtless to the use of a screwdriver in skilful hands on that delicate piece of mechanism. So pronounced was the trouble, however, that it became neces-

sary to invoke the assistance of a local garage. And with becoming gravity Pender listened to the diagnosis.

"I see," he said, when the mechanic had finished. "Possibly some hours, you say. Then I think that I will go out and call on friends and return later. I might even stay the night with them. That will give you plenty of time to make a good job of it."

With which remark he left the garage, and made his way to the station where he took a first-class return ticket to London. The excellent train service was one of the reasons which had made him decide on Hitchin. It was not too close into London, but the journey did not take long. And it was essential that he should be at the White House before lunch time.

He ran over the car time-table as he sat in his corner seat. He would take the Sunbeam from Waterloo Place, and motor down to White Lodge in it. He knew the exact spot where he would leave it—not too near the house, not too far away. A deserted spot where the chances of the car being seen were remote. And even if it was seen who would pay any attention?

Then after it was over he would return to London, and leave it in St. James's Square. Not Waterloo Place again; the man in charge there might recognise him. And then back to Hitchin by train. It would depend on the time whether

he telephoned to his usual garage from there, or from some place farther north.

"Completely forgot the Sunbeam; send a man round to St. James's Square for it."

That would be the message; further proof that he was on his way to Scotland. But he couldn't have done it if both cars had been at the same place. It looks silly to get one car to start with and then go back a few minutes later to get the other.

Brain—that was it; that was the whole secret. Just like chess, only a thousand times more fascinating.

It was just half-past eleven as he drove past the Oval. He had an hour's run before him, and it struck him that he could not have timed it better. Sinclair was dining at Ranelagh that evening, so he wouldn't be remaining too late at White Lodge. And any way the sooner the thing was done the better. It would enable him to get farther on the Great North Road before calling up his garage.

He left the car in the place he had decided on. Not a soul was in sight; for the last two miles he had seen no one. The house was a hundred yards away, almost hidden in the trees, and he strolled towards it quite openly.

There was a possibility that Enid might have altered her mind at the last moment, or that Sinclair had brought someone else down with him.

If so, he was not committed to anything; therein lay the beauty—the simplicity of the scheme. He had merely changed his mind about Scotland, and having nothing better to do had run down to see the improvements at White Lodge as Sinclair had suggested.

At the front door stood Sinclair's car, and as Pender stepped on to the drive Sinclair himself appeared.

"Hullo! old man," he cried. "I thought you were on the road to Scotland."

"Changed my mind at the last moment," said Pender easily, "so I thought I'd come down and see the house."

"But where's your car?"

"I stupidly missed the turn out of the village, and got on to the track leading through the copse. It's up there now."

"Well, it's quite safe there, anyway. Let's have some lunch, and then I'll show you round."

"All alone?" asked Pender.

"Yes, Enid couldn't come."

He was rummaging in the car for sandwiches, and Pender turned away quickly. So it was the end after all, and at the moment he did not want Sinclair to see his face.

"Come on in. There is enough grub here for a regiment, and I'll search round and get another glass."

He led the way to the gun-room, leaving his flask

on the table. Then he went out, and Pender heard him wandering round the back premises. Now that the actual time had come he felt as cool as ice: it was all so simple and easy. From his pocket he took the little phial, and taking out the stopper he emptied the contents into the flask. Then slipping the empty phial back in his pocket he strolled over to the window.

"This is about the only room in the house they haven't touched," said Sinclair, as he came in with a glass a few moments later. "I left everything as it was in here—guns and all. Say when."

"I won't have any whisky, thanks. Just a little of that Perrier."

"Well, I've got a thirst on me like the devil," said the other, mixing himself a drink. "Get on with the sandwiches."

Sinclair drained his glass with a sigh of relief, and proceeded to mix himself another.

"They really have made a very good job of it. The extra bathrooms make the whole difference."

"Excellent," said Pender. "I shall look forward to having a go at your pheasants later on."

His eyes, narrowed and expectant, had seen the sudden half-drunken lurch given by Sinclair.

"Good Lord, Pender," he cried, "I feel damned funny."

"Take another drink. It may be the heat or something."

"I feel—absolutely—blotto. It can't be anything—anything—matter—whisky."

He looked stupidly across the table, and then his eyes closed and his head fell forward. With a gigantic effort he rose to his feet, only to fall back in his chair again. Sinclair slept.

With a faint smile Pender got up: the thing was done. There were one or two small points now to be attended to, but the main thing was done, and more successfully and easily than he had ever dared to hope.

First he took from his pocket a pair of wash-leather gloves, and picking up his glass he dried it carefully with a clean pocket handkerchief. Then leaving the room he returned it to its proper place in the pantry. Next he took up the flask, and Sinclair's tumbler, and emptied the contents of both down the sink, afterwards replacing them on the table beside the unconscious man. To give the impression that the flask had been emptied would make the accident seem more credible. Just a little too much to drink: just enough to make Sinclair a trifle careless. . . .

Then from his pocket he removed four straps, and still retaining his gloves he fastened Sinclair's hands and feet to the arms and legs of the chair in which he was sprawling. He wasn't quite sure how long it would be before Sinclair recovered from the effect of the sleeping draught, and the binding process must be done before that happened.

And now remained only the final thing. From the glass-fronted cupboard in the corner he took a double-barrelled gun, and into one of the barrels he slipped a cartridge. Sinclair still slept.

For a moment or two Pender hesitated. It would be so easy to do it now. And it would be safer. Everything had gone so wonderfully that it seemed like tempting Fate to delay. There sat the man he hated, unconscious, and at his mercy. He had only to press the trigger and the thing would be done. But where would be the satisfaction in that? He wanted Sinclair to understand—to realise what was going to happen to him. He wanted revenge, and to kill an unconscious man was no revenge. He wanted to see terror dawn in those keen blue eyes: above all, he wanted to speak about Enid.

Half an hour passed and Sinclair still lolled forward in his chair, while Pender sat opposite him—waiting. And then suddenly the sleeper awoke and stared dazedly across the table.

"Where am I?" he muttered, foolishly. "What's happened?"

"You are at White Lodge, Sinclair," said Pender quietly. "And I gave you a little drug to send you to sleep which seems to have acted admirably."

"But why am I bound like this?" He was struggling against the fog in his brain.

"Because, before I kill you, I want to have

a talk with you, Sinclair. And I adopted that method to ensure your keeping still."

Sinclair blinked foolishly. Kill! What the devil was Pender talking about? Kill! Was he mad? Were they both mad?

"Doubtless you feel a little surprised, Sinclair. You wonder if you are still dreaming. But I can assure you that you are not: you are very much awake."

"Is this some damned silly jest, Pender?" His mind was clearing rapidly. "If so, it's gone far enough. And what the devil is that gun doing on the table?"

"We will come to the gun in due course, my friend." Pender leaned across the table, and his teeth showed in a sudden snarl. "You swine; I can hardly believe that I've got you at last."

Sinclair said nothing; full realisation of his position had come to him. Of course the man had gone off his head; he was alone—bound and powerless—with a homicidal maniac.

"Please don't think that I'm mad, Sinclair," continued Pender, as if divining his thoughts. "I can assure you that I've never been saner in my life. This is merely the logical outcome of the intense hatred I've felt for you for years. It started at school, Sinclair. Do you remember on one occasion thrashing me till I was almost unconscious?"

"Because you came for me with a knife," answered the other quietly.

"I don't care why—but the fact remains that you thrashed me. That started it, Sinclair; I swore then that some day I'd get my own back."

"In spite of the fact that you shook hands the next day," said Sinclair scornfully. "You rotten Dago."

"So you always called me—all you fellows." Pender's voice shook with ungovernable rage. "Do you suppose I could help having South American blood in me? Anyway the rotten Dago has got the upper hand now."

He controlled himself and went on quietly.

"As I say, that started it, Sinclair. And all through school it was the same. It was Sinclair, Captain of the Eleven; Sinclair, Captain of the Fifteen; Sinclair, Senior Prefect. And it was Sinclair who in his kindly benevolence accorded his divine protection to the rotten Dago. Do you think I liked you for it, you swine? I loathed you all the more. There's no good straining at those straps. They're new and strong."

"You entrancing exhibition of beastliness," roared Sinclair. "Do you mean to tell me that after all these years—after having dined in my house, and eaten my salt—you propose to kill me, because I did better than you at school?"

"Good heavens, no! I was merely starting at

the beginning. I don't deny that frequently I have felt like murdering you. At country houses sometimes when it's been Sinclair who was shooting so wonderfully—and Sinclair who played polo so marvellously—and Sinclair this, and Sinclair that—I could have killed you willingly. But I don't think I should ever have done it but for one thing—Enid."

Sinclair sat very still; he understood at last. And though no sign of it showed on his face, fear was clutching at his heart. No maniac this, but a dangerous, revengeful man.

"Did you know I asked her to marry me, Sinclair? Of course you do. And she refused. But she might have accepted me in time if you hadn't come on the scene. Always you; always you. She is the only woman in the world, Sinclair, whom I have ever wished to make my wife. And she is yours."

"So that is why you propose to murder me," said Sinclair. "A nice method of disposing of a husband, but as a means of endearing yourself to the widow—a trifle crude."

He was talking for time—trying desperately to think.

"And do you really imagine, Sinclair, that I shall let Enid discover the truth? You must have a very poor opinion of my intelligence. Your death will be entirely accidental, and when I hear about it in Scotland I shall hurry back to attend

the—er—obsequies. I am on my way to Scotland now, you know."

"You fool," said Sinclair, harshly. "They'll catch you for a certainty, and you'll hang."

"I think not," answered Pender. "I have devoted what brains I possess to this problem, and I venture to think—not unsuccessfully. You've no idea how fascinating it is—planning a murder. I won't weary you with the precautions I have taken to cover my tracks, but you can see for yourself two or three little things I have done in this room. My glass removed, for instance; a second glass would certainly give rise to comment. Your flask emptied, serving the double purpose of removing all traces of the drug and giving the impression that you had drunk a little too much. It will help to account for the accident that is shortly going to happen, Sinclair. A strange accident for such a careful shot as you—but these things will happen."

Sinclair moistened his lips.

"Cut fooling, Pender. This thing has gone far enough."

"I can promise you it is going considerably farther," sneered the other. "Right through to the end, in fact. That gun is loaded, and in a moment or two now I shall put the muzzle under your chin and blow your damned face off. An accident in cleaning will be the verdict, Sinclair, and I'll attend your funeral even as I attended

your wedding. And then in time maybe Enid will do what she would have done if you hadn't come on the scene—marry me."

"You devil." The veins stood out like whip-cord on Sinclair's forehead as he strained and tugged at the straps. And then of a sudden he sat very still: Pender had picked up the gun in his gloved hands. The end was very near, and with his head thrown back and a look of utter contempt in his eyes he waited for it.

"The straps will be off when they find you, Sinclair: the gun on the floor at your feet. No unexpected, unlooked for event out of the blue, such as that fool Cresswell talked about, to save you: nothing to incriminate me."

The hatred in his eyes was maniacal: the cool scorn on the other's face seemed to drive him to a frenzy.

"You can sneer," screamed Pender, "but you won't when the muzzle is an inch from your chin and my finger is on the trigger. This is the position, Sinclair—just as I am now, only it will be your chin, not mine."

He sat there, the gun between his knees, his chin almost resting on the muzzle.

"Just like this," he repeated softly.

"Hullo!"

It came from the hall—a man's cheerful hail, and Pender gave a violent start.

"Hullo! Hullo!"

Then a pause.

"2 L O calling."

But there was no one to listen to the prominent politician's speech on the Near East which continued cheerfully for the next half-hour.

For Sinclair—well, Sinclair had fainted for the first time in his life.

And Pender—well, Pender had had his finger—that carefully gloved finger—near the trigger when he gave that violent start. And his chin had been almost resting on the muzzle.

In fact, it was only by his clothes that a few hours later he was officially identified as Pender.

I

"WHY so pensive?"

I paused on my way across the crowded restaurant and found myself looking into the grey, laughing eyes of Beryl Travers. She and her large, lazy-looking husband Billy were just finishing their dinner, and the smoke of their cigarettes drifted slowly up into the general blue haze of the room.

"Hallo, people!" I murmured. "You both of you look horribly overfed and pleased with yourselves. Billy—you're getting fat."

"So much warmer, old bean," he answered. "And with tailors what they are these days . . ."

"Sit down and have a cup of coffee, Peter." Beryl pointed to a third chair, and I did as she told me. What matter that my intention a few moments previously had been to join a pal at the other end of the room: I generally did what Beryl told me. The fact that in years gone by I had repeatedly asked her to consent—theoretically, at any rate—to do as I told her (obey seemed a ridiculously archaic word), and that she, as repeatedly, had declined with thanks, had never

altered our friendship. And she still gave me orders with that calm assumption of authority which she reserved exclusively for the not very small but extremely select band who were in like case to myself.

"Wake up, Billy, you lazy blighter," she remarked to her husband, "and order the gentleman some brandy. Your manners get worse daily."

With a grunt he extended a long arm and seized a passing waiter, while Beryl turned to me again.

"Why haven't I seen you, Peter?" she demanded. "Where have you been?"

"I've been in Peru," I answered blandly, stirring my coffee. "I was under the impression that I had written you a letter from Lima, but doubtless the fact slipped your memory."

"I never got it, Peter," she said decidedly.

"Then how the deuce did the youngster get that Peruvian stamp a few months ago?" asked her husband slyly. "That makes us all square, old thing. Don't you get gay with your husband's manners again."

"You are the most tactless man I ever met," said Beryl, laughing in spite of herself. "Of course, I remember now, Peter. Did you have a good time?"

"So so." I passed my open cigarette case to her across the table. "How is Jack?"

"Fit as a colt," answered Billy. "Bursting his skin with condition. And growing more like dear old John every day."

For a moment his eyes met Beryl's with a tender gleam in them, and I glanced away. Never having undertaken the proposition myself of marrying at all, much less a widow, I am not in a position to advance any opinion on the matter. But to the looker-on in such things it might seem as if there must be, at times, some slight feeling of constraint—a tendency, perhaps, to involuntary contrast, which only a very real give and take on each side would smooth over. Especially when there is a youngster in the house "growing more like dear old John every day." Especially, too, when John Manley had been one of Billy Travers's greatest friends. . . . Personally, I can't help thinking that I should prefer not to have known the dear departed. And yet I know perfectly well that should anything happen to Billy—which Heaven forbid—my intimate friendship with him would not restrain me from yet another attempt.

But as I say, it's all theory in my case—and probably wrong. Certain it is that it would be well-nigh impossible to conceive of two more ideal marriages than Beryl's. Before John Manley paid the big price in April, 1918, during the German drive on the Lys, Beryl and he were utterly happy. Jack was two years old: everything was as perfect as things may be in a time when men are up and

doing and women sit and wait. And then had come the news that had turned Heaven into Hell. . . . There were not very many details, though after a while Beryl had tried to find out a little more fully. She wrote to me, I remember, but I was down in the Somme area, and could find out nothing. Some months afterwards I met his battalion resting, and made inquiries, but only the Quartermaster remained of the crowd who had been with them when John was killed. And he had been with the transport somewhere up by the Mont des Cats when it happened. . . .

"The C.O. was blown to pieces, sir," he said to me. "The battalion had a fearful time, and the C.O. was in some *estaminet*, I believe—his temporary headquarters. Down Meteren way. . . ." I nodded; in earlier days I had known Bailleul and Meteren well. "Apparently the shell burst in the room, and blew him and the adjutant and one of the company commanders to pieces. . . . In fact, the only thing in the room that wasn't blown to pieces was one of those penny-in-the-slot automatic pianos."

And with such meagre information, Beryl had had to be content. For many months it had been only the sad-eyed ghost of the Beryl I knew, who went about mechanically, living only for Jack: then, because youth is youth and time is a merciful healer, Billy Travers got his reward. I had hoped that perhaps—well, nothing can stop a man hoping

anyway—but when the hopes went west once more, I accompanied them—to Peru. Billy is a peerless fellow, one of the salt of the earth, and I'm not at all certain that I'm a marrying man—not really. . . .

"What are you going to do now, Peter?" demanded Beryl, breaking the silence.

"You'll laugh when I tell you," I answered. "I frequently laugh myself. I'm taking the car over to France, and I'm going to have a solitary ramble over the battlefields."

"Ramble over the battlefields," Billy blinked at me speechlessly. "My dear old boy—my very dear old boy. . . . What under the sun are you going to do that for? Don't you know that that portion of the battle area which is not covered with vast dumps of mouldering sandbags and rusty traction engines, is completely obscured from view by hordes of personally conducted tourists?"

"It may be all you say, and more," I laughed. "Nevertheless, I'm going. And if the weather is not too utterly foul I shall sleep in the car."

Shaking his head sadly Billy rose.

"Excuse me a moment, darling. I see young Summers over there. Restore him to sanity if you can; and, anyway, get him to promise he won't go near that pub out by Doullens."

With a grin he sauntered away, leaving Beryl staring at me thoughtfully.

"I wish I could come, Peter," she said, at length.

"Why don't you?" I cried eagerly. "There's room in the car for all of us."

But she only shook her head with a ghost of a smile. "I meant with you alone, Peter. Somehow I couldn't go with Billy. . . . He's suggested it two or three times: he thought I'd like to see where John was killed. . . . But I couldn't—not with him. And since unkind people might say something if I went with you, I'm afraid I shan't be able to go at all."

Idly she traced a pattern on the cloth, and it being, as I said before, all theory on my part, I decided that silence was the wisest course.

"Will you be going near Meteren?" she asked presently.

"I expect so," I said. "I'll make a point of it if you like."

Again she gave the ghost of a smile.

"You might take a photograph, Peter, if you can find the house. . . . And perhaps you might discover something. . . . There were a few civilians still left there when it happened, you know."

"I'll see if I can," I said quickly.

Suddenly she leaned forward, her right fist clenched, rolling it round and round in the palm of her left hand.

"Do you remember that trick of his, Peter, whenever he was excited?" she asked me quickly. "Can't you see John doing it now?"

"I can," I answered, pressing out my cigarette.

"Quite clearly. Dear old chap! But you're happy, Beryl—quite, quite happy, aren't you? Tell me that, my dear."

"Quite, quite happy, *mon ami*." She nodded her head slowly. "Quite, quite happy. Only . . . sometimes I feel, that—well, that I'd give anything in the world just to know how he died—how John died. My John. . . ."

With a smile she looked up as Billy came back. "Ready, old boy?"

"Ready, aye, ready! Have you cured him?"

"No," she answered. "Peter always was pig-headed."

Just for a moment our eyes met. "Always," I affirmed, as I followed them out of the restaurant.

II

Billy was right—in spirit, at any rate. And but for my promise to Beryl I think I'd have gone back the first day. It would have been different if I'd had somebody with me, somebody who didn't know, save by hearsay, what it had been. Then, perhaps, one could have exerted oneself, and striven for their sake to paint the picture for their benefit—the picture that is stamped so indelibly on one's brain. And it's different for those who come out in parties, and wander over historic spots with guides to tell them briefly of the men who fought and died there. For them there is the glamour

that comes to all of us when we stand by the cairn on Culloden Moor or wander aimlessly over the fields of Waterloo. Imagination peoples those empty places: a totally erroneous picture probably—but what matter? Our mental picture satisfies us when we do not know the truth. . . .

But when one does know it, there is only disappointment and emptiness in trying to refresh that knowledge. Let it be—for even the ghosts of those who played the game and passed over find it hard to keep on playing it to-day. Only the stunted, gaunt trees remain to remind them of what it used to look like when Mankind felt the great Madness, and even there the undergrowth grows thick where once no blade of grass could live. And so the ghosts are leaving, though, at times, they still whisper through the Woods, of Death. But upon the roads and in the open man has become sane again. You can obtain coffee where once it was death to show your head. . . . Which is quite as it should be: it's tiring and thirsty work wandering over battlefields.

And, as I say, but for my promise to Molly I should have gone home the first day. Instead of which I stopped three weeks. . . . And now that I am back again I ask myself in wondering amazement what it all means: whether I am mad or dreaming, or whether, indeed, I have looked upon one of those mysteries of life and death which man has discussed half mockingly, half fearfully, for

countless centuries. Only this afternoon at the club I put a similar case—as far as I could see it—to a man who dabbled in ancient lore. He spoke learnedly on the doctrine of metempsychosis, and since I didn't know what he meant, I left him as soon as possible. I left him to go into a secluded corner by myself, and once more study the few words written on a sheet of paper which I had carried for a week in my pocket book. When I first read them in the Coq de Paille, near Meteren, I had felt dazed and stupefied : now, with the roar of London coming through the open window, things were different somehow.

It was in Sanctuary Wood that it started—on the day of my arrival. I had motored slowly up the great road through Vlamertinghe—the road that is peculiarly Our Road—I had crossed the square towards the Menin gate. At the top of the rise beyond, I halted : should it be Zonnebeeke or Hooge ? A spin of a coin, and the car turned to the right, past the big school at the bend, and on towards Hell Fire Corner where the railway crosses the road. At the end of the long straight stretch in front lay Hooge, with its blood-stained woods, and its chateau, through the site of which the front line trenches had run. I left the car standing on the spot where once our wire had been—as far as I could tell, that is, for the futility of trying to remember in the face of the utter change had already damped my enthusiasm—

and disregarding the curious glances of the group of tourists on the spot, I turned off the road and plunged into the woods. Already it was getting dusk, but I had a fancy to ramble through the old haunts towards Hill 60—to ramble, and live it over again. At any rate I should be more or less alone: the personally conducted groups adhered, so to speak, to the roads.

It was bad going—it always had been bad going round about Zouave and Sanctuary Woods—and after a while I sat down on a fallen tree trunk and started to fill my pipe. Just about the front line, I decided: just about the spot where Ginger Lawrence had been sniped through the head as he stood beside me in what was known for purposes of reference as a trench. I rather imagined the present brook meandering slowly past my feet had been that trench. . . .

The Boche who did it must have been somewhere over there—I stared thoughtfully, trying to pick up old landmarks in my new surroundings. Then I laughed: the impossibility made the endeavour fatuous. And after a while I closed my eyes and leaned back: it was easier to remember when I couldn't see. I could hear them again—the strange night sounds: I could catch the muffled clang of a carelessly used shovel, the pinging spit of a rifle close by—the phut of the bullet striking mud . . . I could see the toothpick trees—gaunt and eerie in the light of the green flares. . . .

Ah! well, it was over and done with: let it rest at such. I was a fool to have come, for no man may recapture a lost emotion. Even as I sat there I felt the artificiality of it all.

I opened my eyes, I would go back to the car. The next moment I stiffened with sudden terror, only to throw myself flat on the ground behind the sheltering trunk. It must have been the inherent connection of the wood that made me do it so promptly—made my body act in a flash as it would have done four years before. Elsewhere I should have hesitated, I feel tolerably sure—should have shouted, cursed—had I seen the muzzle of a rifle, with stealthy eyes peering over the sights, pointing unwaveringly at me from some bushes a few yards away. As it was, the association was too acute, and in a flash I had taken cover. Then very distinctly I heard the click of the bolt going home, followed, not by any bullet, but by a little cackling laugh. And when I realised that some foolish Belgian child had scared me into hurling myself flat on an extremely damp portion of an extremely damp wood, I felt profoundly glad that the tourists did adhere to the roads. . . . With what dignity I could muster I got up: if I could only catch the little brute, I'd give him the hiding of his life. But to my surprise it was no child who emerged cautiously and came towards me, but a grown man.

"What the devil do you mean?" I shouted, "by

playing these damned monkey tricks ? Don't you know you oughtn't to have that rifle at all ? "

In my anger I had spoken in English ; and then to my amazement I realised that he was answering me in the same tongue.

" Why not ? " he said, standing in front of me. " I do no one any harm with it, and it was what we used in the great days." His eyes were a little vacant, but otherwise he was to all appearances a typical Belgian peasant.

" I dare say you don't do any harm with it," I answered angrily—the water had just got through one knee of my trousers ; " but you've no right to have it ? Where did you get it ? It's a British rifle."

" One of the eight hundred who passed over gave it to me," he said gravely.

" What the devil . . ." I began, only to break off abruptly. For the man had dropped the rifle, and, coming a few steps nearer, was peering at me earnestly.

" Where have I seen you before, monsieur ? "

I stared at him as he spoke : the man's face was vaguely familiar, but I was still too annoyed to try and remember where I might have met him. And then, just as I was on the point of again starting to curse him, the sane look on his face disappeared, and he began to babble vacantly—a mixture of Flemish and French and English, interspersed with little cackles of laughter. Out of the meaningless

jumble of words I caught an odd phrase every now and then, but the poor devil was so obviously not responsible for his actions that my anger evaporated and I laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Listen," I said, and at my touch he grew quiet. "What is your name?"

"Pierre, *m'sieur*," he answered. "Pierre, they call me. But—sometimes—it seems as if there was another name. . . . Only," he passed his hand across his forehead, "I can't think. . . ."

"Well, try and think now, Pierre," I went on gently, "and remember what I am going to say. You must not come into the woods and play with that rifle. You might hurt yourself and other people, too."

"*Oui, m'sieur.*" He nodded his head gravely once or twice, and I smiled at him. Poor blighter—the fault was not his: his friends ought to look after him better. . . .

"Where did you learn that English, Pierre?" I said after a moment.

He shook his head gravely. "I have always spoken English, *m'sieur*," he answered. "At least . . . I think so. . . . Only—I can't think; I can't. . . ." He seemed on the point of another outburst and I broke in quickly:

"All right, Pierre; it doesn't matter." What strange tragedy lay behind this poor half-witted loon? "It doesn't matter. But don't play with the gun any more, will you?"

I turned away and commenced to stroll back towards the car. Perhaps some of the inhabitants would know his history, and I felt interested in this crazy peasant who had always spoken English. And it was not till I reached the car and was slipping on an overcoat that I realised that he had followed me. He had left the gun behind, and with his hands in his pockets was leaning against the side of a wooden hut watching me foolishly.

The next moment a stout Belgian woman emerged, and seized him not unkindly by the arm. A torrent of Flemish poured from her lips, which is possibly the most dreadful noise a man may listen to, and then she proceeded to drag him indoors. But he hung back, staring fascinated at the car, and, moved by a sudden impulse, I spoke to the woman in French. Mercifully she understood me, and I asked her about Pierre.

He was mad, of course ; Monsieur could see that for himself. And he had repeatedly been told not to go into the wood with her husband's gun. . . . How her husband became possessed of the gun was unknown to her : a mystery—due to *la guerre*, doubtless. Madame waxed volubly apologetic ; then, seeing that the subject of how her husband got a British rifle did not interest me, she returned to Pierre.

For a year—more—he had been with them. What could they do—was he not imbecile ? And he was useful at odd jobs : cutting wood and things

like that. No, she could not say where he had come from. . . . Once, during the winter, a cousin of her late brother-in-law had visited them, and she had come from near Bailleul. . . . Monsieur knew Bailleul, beyond Kemmel and the hills? But, of course, Monsieur had fought: *tous les Anglais* had fought the *sacré* Boche. . . . And this cousin had thought that Pierre had lived near Fletre or maybe Meteren. . . .

Meteren! I turned away, listening half consciously to the woman's voluble chatter. And half consciously my eyes rested on the crazy Pierre, who was wandering round the car, occasionally touching it gently with one of his fingers. At length he stood still gazing at it, and for one brief second my heart stood still. For the lunatic was rolling his clenched fist round and round in the palm of his hand. . . . Then he came shambling towards us, and I laughed out loud at my foolishness.

"It is long since I have been in a car," he announced.

"Is it, Pierre," I said, smiling. "Would you like a ride in mine?" I spoke without thinking on the spur of the moment.

"A ride, monsieur!" The vacant eyes lit up; he seemed almost stunned at the mere suggestion. "Why, yes . . . and Monsieur will take me—take me to the *estaminet*—where—where . . ." The gleam faded, and he stared at me dully.

And once again it struck me that the man's face was vaguely familiar.

"Shall we go to Bailleul, Pierre," I said slowly, "and Meteren?"

"Meteren!" His face lit up. "Yes, to Meteren, *m'sieur*. To the *estaminet* where the music is."

"Music!" I said slowly. "What sort of music?"

"A piano, *m'sieur*. *Deux sous* must be put in, and the piano plays. And sometimes it stops in the middle of the tune. . . ." He grinned cheerfully. "And then it goes on again. . . ."

But I was not listening; I was thinking furiously. An automatic piano: Meteren: that trick of John Manley's! Could it be possible that this half-witted creature could tell me something new about John—something about his death? Civilians had been there right up to the last, and a lunatic would somewhat naturally have been forgotten in the panic of flight. . . . Why, perhaps he had been actually in the *estaminet* when John was killed. . . . And I laughed again: it struck me I was travelling rather fast. . . .

"Tell me, Pierre," I said; "have you ever met a British officer who did this?"

I rolled my right fist in my left hand, and he stared at me. Once I thought I saw a gleam of remembrance in his eyes: then it faded.

"I can't think," he muttered. "I can't think, *m'sieur*."

With a smile I patted him on the shoulder. "All right, Pierre; don't worry. To-morrow morning I will come and fetch you in the car, and we'll go for a ride to the *estaminet* where the music is."

My intention, when interpreted to madame, was merely another proof of the complete insanity of all Englishmen; but as long as they came out in large quantities and bought her vin rouge—*ça ne fait rien*. Monsieur would bring him back, *sans doute;* he was useful drawing water and doing odd jobs like that . . . and monsieur would understand that both she and her husband were fond of Pierre. An imbecile, true, but affectionate. . . . Monsieur would have a glass of wine—*mais, certainement, toute de suite*. . . .

She bustled into the house, and returned with an opened bottle. One glass was a necessity, and I accepted it with a bow.

"*A votre santé, madame*," I murmured.

"*A votre santé, monsieur*," she returned, beaming. Truly mad—but they paid well—*les Anglais*. . . .

And over the top of my glass I was watching an imbecile peasant whose face was vaguely familiar, slouching round and round my car, and rubbing one fist into the palm of his other hand as he walked. . . .

That was three weeks ago. . . .

III

It is the next fortnight that baffles me; the fortnight that culminated in the writing on a sheet of paper and the strange end of the writer. I find it difficult, even so short a time afterwards, to get that fortnight in perspective. Little things seem to stand out, with a complete lack of proportion, from the dull monotonous days when I waited and watched, wondering whether the gleam of remembrance would pierce the poor bemused brain. Occasional flashes came, occasional rays of hope—then blankness again. And of all the little things, the one which grips me hardest—the vignette which stands out most vividly in my mind—occurred three days after I arrived with Pierre at the Coq de Paille.

It was at a slack hour, and the room was empty save for Madame polishing rows of glasses behind the bar. I was seated at a table reading a paper in the intervals of wondering whether I wasn't a fool to stop on, and Pierre—I'd forgotten about him until quite suddenly he spoke.

"They've got a machine-gun in that clump over there. Get through to Brigade, Tony. . . ."

I glanced up at him quickly, and my pulses beat a little faster. He had his back to me, and was staring out of the window towards Bailleul. Was it possible that at length my patience was going to be rewarded?

"Which clump?" I got up and stood beside him.

"Over there." He pointed to some trees on the other side of the main road. "They've been sending up white flares."

"Better get the gunners on to 'em," I hazarded.

"Why, of course," he cried irritably, and even as he spoke the gleam faded from the eyes and the vacant look returned.

"Pierre," I cried, dropping my usual caution and seizing him by the arm. "Pierre—who did you hear say that?" In my excitement I shook him to and fro. "Think, man, think. Try to remember. . . ."

But the fog had fallen again, and my hand dropped to my side. It was hopeless. He only stared at me uncomprehendingly and shook his head, babbling a little in Flemish.

"One penny, monsieur," he said after a while, "and we shall have music."

The number of pennies I expended on that cursed instrument would have bought another, but though he rarely spoke when it was playing his face seemed to become eager—less vacant. And each time I hoped that perhaps I might get something definite. Madame was kind—an understanding woman—and I had told her enough to make her sympathetic. But beyond that she was of but little assistance. She had not been the original owner of the *estaminet*, and had only

acquired it since the war. All she could tell me was that when she had bought it, the house was not much more than a gutted shell. The whole of the wall fronting the road had been torn away ; the ceiling was in ruins. And even now the wooden shutters which were nightly put up inside the windows were splintered and torn with bullet holes.

Only one piece of positive information did she give me, and that she obtained on the fourth day from M. le Maire. Pierre undoubtedly had been in the neighbourhood right up to the last ; he had worked at the farm next door, and the worthy mayor further volunteered the information that the Coq de Paille was the *estaminet* where all the labourers on that farm used to buy their beer.

What she told me was useful up to a point, though it merely confirmed what I had long been sure of. Mad though he was, it was clear he knew the place ; he recognised old landmarks, and called the farms within sight by their correct names. And more and more as days went on did I begin to feel convinced that this poor half-witted creature had, buried in his hazy brain, the remembrance of the time when the Germans came to Meteren in the last eddy forward of their offensive on the Lys. It was guess-work, true ; but the Quartermaster's description of the place, and that strange trick with his hands—the sort of mannerism that a child or a lunatic would imitate—encouraged me to perse-

vere. I believed that he had seen John Manley—seen him not long before the end. Had listened at the door, perhaps, while John spoke. How else could one account for such a remark as : " Get through to Brigade, Tony ? "

But beyond belief I could not get. Often something seemed to be trembling on his lips, and I would lean forward breathless in my eagerness, only to sit back disappointed. The eyes I stared into would become vacant again : Pierre would moon listlessly away. And on the twelfth day I had almost decided to give it up and go, when he said something which made me determine to try one more thing before taking him back to Hooge.

The automatic piano was thumping out some tune which, according to the index and pointer, was a gavotte. It sounded more like a Dead March, but of all the tunes which the instrument murdered, this one seemed to have the most effect on Pierre. It was half-way through its pennyworth, when he rose and stared at it with a peculiar look on his face.

" It used to stop there, *m'sieur* ; stop—and then later, go on."

" Did it ? " I asked. " When was that ? "

He was peering at it from close to—touching it gingerly with one finger, as he had touched my car.

" The night that the noise came—it had stopped, and then after the noise—it went on again. They cursed it—the officers. . . ."

"They cursed it, did they?" My voice shook a little. "Who cursed it, Pierre?"

"The big man, who sat at the table. Where you are sitting now."

"Was he the man who did this?" I asked quickly, once more rolling my right fist in my left palm.

But it had gone; the gleam had left him—and I swore under my breath.

"I can't think, *m'sieur*," he muttered. "I can't think. . . ."

Madame came in at that moment, and I rose and went over to her.

"Was there anything wrong with this piano, madame," I asked, "when you first came here?"

"Why, yes, *m'sieur*," she said, and her voice was surprised. "But how did you know? It used to stop at times in the middle of a tune. Something wrong with the mechanism. A clockmaker from Hazebrook mended it last winter. Has it been doing it again?"

I reassured her; the mechanical abomination did nothing so sensible. But that evening, after the *estaminet* had closed, I examined it carefully. And it was easy to see that by placing a small obstruction in the path of the penny the machine would stop in the middle of the tune.

It was the next evening that I decided to make my last attempt to get through the fog to the brain beneath. If this failed then I would give it up. It did not fail, though now I almost wish it had.

For I can't free myself of the dreadful suspicion that . . . However, this is what happened.

The last labourer had departed; the splintered wooden shutters were in position. Madame had gone to bed, leaving me to sit up with Pierre. He was sleepy—like the birds and children the day of such as he ends with sundown—and once or twice his head had nodded forward over the table littered with dirty beer glasses. It was not until I slipped in the penny and the tune started that he roused himself and sat up. . . .

Halfway through the music stopped, and from beside the piano I watched him eagerly: would I at last be more successful?

"Thank God! that damned noise has stopped. Which of you fellows turned it on? How in the name of fortune can anybody be expected to sleep with that hurdy-gurdy performing?"

I held my breath; was I listening to the last words of John Manley?

"What's that—what's that you say? They're through!" Pierre had risen and was staring at the door. "On the right! Damn the Rutlands; they've let us down again. Two platoons from B Company—quick. Notebook, Tony—notebook. . . ."

Feverishly I pushed a piece of paper in front of him, and a pencil.

"Are they through on the road? God! and I've got no one to throw in!"

He was writing as he spoke. "Eight hundred in three days. . . . Ah!" His voice rose to a dreadful shout. "Look out!"

He hurled himself flat on the floor, as a man will do who hears the screech of a shell on top of him, and in my excitement I let go of the penny. The automatic piano went on again . . . playing its gavotte which sounded more like a Dead March. . . . And Pierre, the lunatic, lay still and motionless beside the table. . . .

With faltering steps I approached him while the tune clanged on.

"The night that the noise came—it had stopped. And then after the noise—it went on again. They cursed it—the officers."

I remembered his words, and for some strange reason I felt frightened. I felt I was confronted with something beyond my ken . . . even before I reached Pierre and found that he was dead. I looked at him stupidly. Dead! How could he be dead? . . . And still the tune clanged on. . . .

What had killed him? A little stream of beer poured off the table on to his face, and as I bent over to cover it with a handkerchief, I gave a smothered cry. Incredible as it appears to me now, I seemed to see about him a strange likeness to John Manley. . . . I say it appears incredible now; I say it *is* incredible now, but I say it half-heartedly. Even here in London I cannot

convince myself. . . . I might be able to but for the piece of paper. . . .

It is lying before me as I turn and re-turn the matter in my mind ; a little scrap of paper stained with Flemish beer :

" B.M. 931st Bde. Enemy broken through on right flank. Am inves. . . ."

Nothing more is written, and the last " s " tails away into a long scrawl. But the handwriting is the handwriting of John Manley.

He talked of metempsychosis—did that man in the club. I've looked it up since in the dictionary.

" Metempsychosis. The passing of the soul at death into another body, whether of a brute or a person. The doctrine was held by the ancient Egyptians, taught by the Pythagoreans and in the Orphic mysteries of Greece, and is a tenet of East Indian philosophy."

Can it be possible that with that last loud shout of warning before the shell blew him to pieces, the soul of John Manley passed into the body of Pierre, loitering, maybe, near the door outside. I know not . . . as I say, I try to think it is incredible.

But one thing I do know : whether it did or whether it didn't, that soul is at rest now. . . .

And Beryl—I'm seeing her to-morrow. She rang me up and seemed surprised I'd been away so long. And I didn't tell her that I'd waited to attend the funeral of—a lunatic. . . .

But to-morrow I'll paint her the picture—not too clearly, not with too much detail. She might wonder how I knew, or think I was making it up. But I'd like her to see in her mind that simple room with the glasses on the shelves, and hear the gavotte that sounded like a Dead March playing out the soul of John Manley, while the choking dust and falling bricks gradually settled on the floor, and the night breeze blew in through the great hole in the wall. And I've got some photos for her. . . .

It's the paper that worries me; she wouldn't understand that paper—any more than I do. And she's happy with Billy—quite, quite happy. It might make her—worry and think useless things. . . . For, any way, the soul is at rest now.

* * * * *

I've just ground the ashes in the grate to pieces with my foot. Of course, the whole thing is incredible.

I

THE Trade Show was just over. The leading man and the leading lady, having watched themselves for two hours on the screen, had appeared before the audience in the flesh. The producer had come on to the stage and bowed. And finally the man who had expended well over forty thousand pounds on the production came on and bowed also.

At each separate rise of the curtain renewed applause broke out from the audience. There was no doubt that "Loaded Dice," in spite of its somewhat melodramatic name, was something distinctly out of the ordinary. Hardly a dissentient voice was to be heard amongst the hundreds of critical spectators who had been invited to the Alhambra to see the first public exhibition. Actors, authors, film-stars, and—most critical of all—other producers agreed that "Loaded Dice" was an exceptionally fine film, brilliantly acted and lavishly staged.

Carlton Bellairs, the leading man and a London actor-manager of note, had fully sustained his great reputation in a strong emotional part; Sylvaine Lankester, the leading lady, had supported him

with her usual consummate ability. And quite up to their standard had been John Drage, who was the third of the principals.

The action of the film had revolved round these three. Not for one moment had the interest flagged through the whole six reels. A few side issues had been introduced principally for the purpose of showing some wonderful photographs of Italian and Egyptian scenery ; but only a few. The film required no padding. Right from the start it led steadily and inexorably to the final clash between the two men for the possession of the girl. One knew it was coming, and yet—so good was the story —one never wanted to get on quicker ; to skip, as one might say in book parlance.

And when it finally came it held one breathless, principally because of the marvellous acting. To write it may render it banal ; its very essential lay in the unspoken horror and tragedy of the scene. Carlton Bellairs, of course, was acting the part of the hero, Hubert Malden, and Sylvaine played the girl, Mary Maxwell. John Drage, the other principal, was in popular phraseology the villain, Edward Latford. And the final scene took place in Mary's villa at Florence. She was seated with Hubert Malden on a sofa in the drawing-room, thinking that at long last their troubles were over. Edward Latford had, as they thought, been finally disposed of, and she had just promised to marry Hubert.

And after a while he had risen and pressed the bell for the butler to bring tea. They were secure ; they were in love ; everything was wonderful. And in that mood they waited for the tea, while we who looked on, keyed up with excitement, waited, too. At last the door opened ; doubtless the butler bringing tea. The happy couple on the sofa moved decorously apart, and even as they did so a shadow was thrown on the wall—a shadow which they could not see but which we could. It was the shadow of an arm outstretched a little, and a revolver was in the hand. Slowly the shadow moved forward until the body appeared, and then finally the man himself. Still the pair on the sofa waited in blissful ignorance ; only we knew that it was not the butler, but Edward Latford. And on his face there blazed a look of fanatical hate.

Suddenly he swung round the door, and they saw him. For a moment they held the position, and we had time to see the superb acting of all three. Speechless horror by the girl ; a momentary indecision by the hero before he flung himself at the villain ; blazing fury by the villain. Then the villain fired, and the hero pitched forward on his face. The scene faded out, and then showed again to let us see that the villain had turned his revolver on his own head and committed suicide.

Such, in brief, was the climax up to which a very remarkable film led. I have no intention of

telling any more of the story; when "Loaded Dice" is released in due course the public may see it for themselves. But it has been necessary to give this one scene, in order to make clear the extraordinary statement which was made to me that evening by a wild-eyed man in a little restaurant in Soho. I still cannot make up my mind as to whether his story was the truth or not, though some day, if I am in Italy with time to spare, I may test it. Certain it is that this man knew all that there was to be known of the inside of the film business; that he had either acted himself, or, at any rate, worked in some capacity in a studio admits of no doubt. I know sufficient of the game myself to feel assured of that. But whether he was what he said he was, or whether he was partially demented and had imagined it, I know not. Those who are interested can read on and judge for themselves.

The audience was thinning out when I first saw him. Little knots of people stood about discussing the film, and in the centre of one group stood Sylvaine Lankester, receiving the congratulations she richly deserved.

"Magnificent, my dear," said one woman, and a general murmur of assent followed—a murmur which was broken by a harsh, discordant laugh, which made everyone swing round hurriedly. It was a man whom I had noticed as I left my

stall, a man with blazing eyes. His clothes were somewhat shabby, and I had wondered casually when I first saw him how he had got in to the trade show. But now he stood on the edge of the group which surrounded Sylvaine Lankester, and stared at her mockingly.

"Magnificent!" he sneered. "Why, you were rotten. Rotten, I tell you, Sylvaine Lankester. What did you want to register fear for—fear and horror—as Edward Latford came round the door? Blank, I know, blank ammunition was in the revolver. And the fool producer told you to show fear. But supposing it hadn't been blank, Sylvaine Lankester? Supposing that film had been the truth, what then?"

Instinctively the girl recoiled from him, and someone in the group muttered: "He's mad; the man's mad."

But even if he heard he took no heed; his eyes were still fixed on the actress who had played the part of Mary Maxwell.

"You wouldn't have shown fear then, Sylvaine Lankester—not if you were such a woman as Mary. You would have shown a steady courage, a supreme indifference, a blazing contempt."

"Extremely interesting," drawled a man standing by. "And may one ask how you happen to know all this?"

"Because that is what Mary Maxwell *did* show," answered the stranger, quietly. "Courage,

indifference, contempt—but not fear. A thousand times no ; not fear."

Without another word he turned and walked away, leaving the people in the group staring after him open-mouthed. What on earth had he meant —"That is what Mary Maxwell *did* show"? And then in a moment or two, with a few significant shrugs of their shoulders, they dismissed the matter from their minds. Obviously a lunatic, was the general comment, and lunatics are not very interesting. But I, who had heard it all, was not so sure. To me it had seemed as if there was a ring of sincerity underlying the wild words—a ring of truth. And on the spur of the moment I hurried after him. I overtook him outside the Empire, and touched him on the shoulder. He swung round and stared at me with eyes full of hostility, and for a moment I regretted my hasty impulse.

"What do you want?" he snapped. "I don't know you."

His collar was frayed, his coat was ragged, but there was an indefinable something about his face, now that I saw him close to, which made me determined to go on with it in spite of his uncompromising attitude. The difficulty lay in what line to take with him. I felt that the barest hint of charity would freeze him up like an oyster ; there was a strange fierce pride in those sombre eyes of his. And then I had a sudden inspiration.

"I'm an author of sorts," I said, quietly, "and

I was in the Alhambra a few minutes ago. I heard what you said to Miss Lankester, and I think, if I may say so, that you were wrong. No woman would show anything but fear in such circumstances."

For a moment he stared at me with a faint, half-contemptuous smile on his lips.

"You think so?" he remarked. "Well, it's you who are wrong—just as Sylvaine Lankester was wrong. And if you care to supply me with a little dinner to-night—I regret that on threepence-halfpenny I cannot offer to act as host myself—I will prove to you that you are wrong."

"Certainly," I answered at once. "I shall be delighted if you'll dine with me. Shall we say eight o'clock at Bordini's Restaurant in Greek Street?"

"Would it inconvenience you greatly to make it a little earlier?" he said. "Since yesterday at midday I'm afraid I haven't had very much to eat."

"Good Lord! My dear fellow," I cried, aghast, "any time you like. Shall we say seven—or six-thirty?"

"Six-thirty," he answered, promptly. "Bordini's! I know it."

With a quick nod he was gone, leaving me staring after him a little foolishly. Was the man a fraud, or had he really got some strange story hidden in his mind? I strolled towards the club, still wondering.

II

Promptly at six-thirty I turned through the swing doors of the restaurant to find him sitting at one of the tables inside. I suggested a cocktail, which he refused, and under my breath I cursed myself for a fool. One does not offer cocktails to men who haven't fed for thirty hours or more. Instead I ordered dinner at once, with a pint of the Chianti for which Bordini's is famous. And then for the next half-hour I watched one of the most pathetic sights in the world—a gentleman who is starving, with food before him. For the man was a gentleman all right—his hands alone were sufficient to prove it. And he was trying to eat as a gentleman eats, while all the time hunger—stark hunger—was gnawing at him. And I wondered what he'd had even so recently as midday the day before.

But at last he finished, and with another flagon of Chianti between us, and a cigarette alight in his mouth, he leaned back in his chair and stared at me with a gleam of mocking humour in his eyes.

"And now I suppose I must pay for my dinner," he remarked.

"Damn it!" I said, a little stiffly, "it was you who suggested it. If you look at it that way, please consider the matter ended and we'll go."

"Forgive me!" He leaned across the table. "I'm a sarcastic brute, though I wasn't once. But

there are some people, my friend, for whom nothing ever seems to go right in this world. Maybe it's their own fault—maybe it isn't. Incidentally, the cause doesn't make much odds—it's the effect that counts."

He broke off abruptly. "How did you like that film to-day?"

"Very much," I answered. "Very much indeed."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I wrote it."

"You did what?" I said, staring at him in surprise.

"I wrote it. I wrote the scenario, and I played in the original film."

"But surely," I cried, "that was an original production this afternoon? It was announced as such."

"Parts of it were original; parts of it had never been done before. But parts of it had; I suppose half of it had—quite half. And that half I have seen once on the screen. There's just one copy of it in existence to-day."

"But do these people who produced 'Loaded Dice' know about it?" I asked.

"I don't know if they do or not," he answered. "And it doesn't make much odds, because it will never be shown."

"What part did you play?" I asked.

"Hubert Malden," he remarked, quietly. "The part taken by Carlton Bellairs this afternoon."

I preserved a discreet silence. I could hardly see this lean, cadaverous, down-at-heels man in the character as it had been created for me by Bellairs.

"Yes—I played the part of Hubert Malden," he continued, after a while. "But that's the end of the story. I'll begin at the beginning."

He refilled his glass and lit another cigarette.

"I don't know if you're interested in the film business. I am, or rather"—and he smiled faintly—"I was. Right from the very start the immense possibilities of the moving picture impressed me. Even in those days when the standard consisted of a one-reel play which gave you a headache to look at, I had visualised in my own mind something of the perfection which you can see to-day. And I went into the show heart and soul. I acted a bit, and I did a certain amount of producing—you'll remember that this was in the days before a producer, if he knew his job, could command almost any salary he liked to ask—and in my spare time I wrote one or two scenarios. I didn't attach myself to any particular company; I was just a free-lance. And though I say it myself, my name was fairly well known in the industry. What that name is doesn't make much odds; it's forgotten to-day."

He paused a moment to press out his cigarette.

"One day in London the agent of a certain

Italian firm approached me with an offer to produce their new film for them in Italy. They wanted an English producer, as the film was an English film and most of the artistes were English also. They offered me what in those days was quite a considerable sum ; to-day a producer would laugh in your face if you mentioned such a figure. However, it was good enough for me, and I accepted. I read the scenario going out to Italy, and was ready to begin work as soon as I arrived. It was just an ordinary straightforward English story, the adaptation of a novel—and I've only mentioned it because I said I'd start at the beginning. That film was the beginning of my acquaintance with—well, shall we call her Mary Maxwell ? She was one of the English actresses engaged by the firm, and I fell in love with her the first moment I saw her."

Again he smiled faintly as he looked at me.

" I'm not going to bore you with lover's rhapsodies," he continued. " I'm only going to say that she was then, and has remained ever since, the loveliest girl I have ever seen. She made one catch one's breath with the wonder of her, and she was utterly and absolutely unspoiled. She was so immeasurably more lovely than Sylvaine Lankester that any comparison even would be ludicrous. And somewhat naturally I was not the only man who had noticed the fact. Love has a knack of quickening up one's powers of observation, and I

hadn't been in that studio for two days before I realised that one of the Italian actors in the cast—Paolo Cimetti by name—was in love with her, too. A film studio, as you probably know, is a fairly free-and-easy place, and sometimes for hours on end actors and actresses will be sitting about doing nothing, while other scenes in which they do not appear are being taken. Only the producer is busy the whole time, and often it was as much as I could do to concentrate on my job, when I knew that Mary and the Italian were not in the studio where I could see them. I used to imagine things ; I used to grow almost mad with jealousy ; once I let down a complete scene because my mind was wandering.

" Not that I had the slightest right to be jealous ; beyond talking to her as a producer I had hardly said two words to Mary since I had arrived. As far as I knew I was less than nothing to her ; but men in the condition I was in are not over-logical. Certain it was that she gave the Italian not the slightest encouragement—at any rate in public, though his attitude to her very soon became obvious to everybody. He followed her about like a dog ; he brought her flowers and chocolates, and his eyes used to be on her wherever she was. God ! how I hated that man, though I did my best not to show it. But he knew—right from the beginning he knew—and he hated me just as bitterly.

"And then one day came the first flare-up between him and me. He was a good actor—a very good actor—and he was fully aware of the fact. In addition, he was playing lead—by the way, I don't think I mentioned that Mary was also playing lead. And he was fully aware of that fact also. On this particular occasion we were doing a close-up of him alone. In a corner of the studio was Mary talking to someone, and in the middle of the shot her laugh rang out suddenly. And Cimetti looked across at her. It was an unpardonable thing to do, and he knew it, even before I stopped the camera.

"'Again, please,' I said. 'And kindly pay attention.'

"He said nothing; there was nothing he could say, but for the first time in my life I realised the meaning of the phrase to have murder in one's eyes. There was murder in Cimetti's eyes as he looked at me.

"And then very soon afterwards matters came to a head. What took me upstairs past the dressing-rooms I don't know, but as I rounded a corner I saw Mary struggling in Cimetti's arms. They were standing in the passage outside her room, and he was trying to kiss her whilst she was pushing him away with both her hands. It was enough for me; I hit him on the point of the jaw with every atom of strength I could put into it. He crashed like a log, hitting his head against the wall

as he fell. And then—well, my friend, it's difficult to say how these things happen—I found Mary in my arms, and this time she didn't struggle. Instead she gave me her lips—her wonderful mouth—to kiss."

He said the words almost under his breath, and then for a while sat motionless, staring across the little restaurant thick with the blue haze of tobacco smoke. In his eyes was a look of dumb, hopeless longing ; he was back in the past with his memories. For the moment I was forgotten ; nothing lived, nothing counted with the man opposite save the touch of a woman's lips on his.

"What is it that Goethe says somewhere ?" he continued after a while. "'There are many echoes, but few voices.' There's only been one voice in my life, and that voice there was no misunderstanding. My love for that girl dwarfed everything else, and when I found that it was the same with her the whole world just changed. You're a stranger to me, and I don't really know why I'm telling you all this, except that you've given me a dinner. I don't know whether you've ever been in love, and—what is far more wonderful—been loved as I was. But if you have, then you will know that I do not exaggerate when I say that no Heaven of imagination can give anything quite so marvellous if it lasts, and no Hell anything quite so agonising if it ceases. Time heals the wound a little but it's always there, my friend, it's always there."

Thoughtfully he lit another cigarette.

"However, I'm not here to bore you with a dissertation on love. Let us go back for a moment to where I was standing in the passage with Mary in my arms. Cimetti was forgotten, and then some movement on his part reminded us of his presence. I looked down and saw him, and for a second my heart stood still. He was crouching back against the wall, with every tooth in his head bared in a snarl, and a long stiletto half-pulled from his pocket. But it was his eyes that fascinated me. They were gleaming with such a frenzy of diabolical hatred that for a moment I thought the man was a maniac. And then, even as he saw me looking at him over Mary's shoulder, the madness faded and was replaced by an expressionless mask. So quickly did he control himself that, when I came to think about it afterwards, I wondered if I hadn't made a mistake. Some trick of the light, perhaps, in the passage. He stood up, muttered a word or two of apology to Mary, and walked away. And she shuddered in my arms.

"'He frightens me,' she whispered, and I soothed her and comforted her till she forgot him.

"And now I must get on. You're wondering, maybe, where the film you saw this afternoon comes in. Well—it comes in very soon. I told you, didn't I? that I had written the scenario of 'Loaded Dice,' and I had taken it with me to

Italy to polish it up and round off one or two edges. And one night I read it to Mary. She was immensely struck with it—as you saw for yourself to-day, it made a good film—and she at once suggested to me that I should offer the scenario to the firm we were then working with. Further, she suggested that she and I should play joint lead if the directors agreed. And then we sat together seeing visions and dreaming dreams of the future. How we would stagger the film industry with our consummate acting; how we should leave this small firm we were with and go over to America where the big money lies; above all, how we would get married. We'd do it before we took the Egyptian part of the film, we decided. It wouldn't mean long to wait; the present production was nearly over. Another six weeks, perhaps two months, would see us through all the Italian interiors of 'Loaded Dice,' and then—marriage. Of course, I need hardly tell you that no film is taken in the actual order in which it is shown. All the scenes of any one place are taken at the same time, and later, when the film is finally joined together, they are put into the proper sequence.

"So we dreamed that night, and next day we could scarcely believe our eyes when it seemed as if all the dreams were coming true. The firm jumped at the scenario, and bought it from me on the spot. At first they wanted me to produce it, but Mary pleaded and argued. She was insistent

that I should play lead with her, and when the directors discovered that we were engaged they agreed with true Southern gallantry. I'd played lead before, of course, with English companies.

"There was an American producer—quite a well-known man—in Rome at the time, and they engaged him in my place. And then we came to the question of casting the various parts. First and foremost came Edward Latford—the part taken by John Drage to-day. Unanimously they decided on Cimetti, and Mary and I looked at one another. We didn't want him in the cast at all, but there was no possible way of dispensing with him. He was under contract—the firm would have had to pay his salary in any case, and he was a first-class actor. To the directors the choice was obvious, so obvious that to protest against it would have been an impossibility. For, after all, what could we have said? That we didn't like him! Likes and dislikes are as common in the film world as elsewhere—perhaps commoner. And to do the man justice I had to admit to myself that I had no fault to find with his behaviour since Mary and I had become engaged. He had been consistently polite and courteous, and had been one of the first to congratulate me on my good fortune. And so the wheel of fate took another relentless turn towards the inevitable end."

He rested his elbows on the table and stared at me with sombre eyes.

"I suppose you've guessed that end already," he went on, slowly. "Sometimes now, when I look back on the weeks that followed, I nearly go mad. When I realise that all through those wonderful days every beat of the clock was just one second nearer the end, my brain seems almost bursting. If only one could have known: if only one could have had some premonition of what was to happen. And yet perhaps it was better so. It could have done no good: it would have only made my Mary miserable and unhappy had she been frightened with vague fears of impending danger. Because by the very nature of the thing it was inevitable: you see, *it was a part of the film itself.* And so I who wrote the film am responsible for killing the woman I loved."

His hands were clenching and unclenching, and the sweat was glistening on his forehead.

"I killed her, man—I killed her; just as surely, just as inevitably, as that devil Cimetti who actually fired the shot. Listen carefully—for there's not much more to tell.

"You remember the scene, don't you—the climax of the film—where Hubert Malden and Mary Maxwell, having rung the bell for the butler, sit waiting on the sofa and then Edward Latford enters instead: the scene about which I spoke to Sylvaine Lankester this afternoon. It was almost the last scene to be taken before we left and went

to Egypt, and though it's so long ago I can recall every detail of that morning.

"Everybody was in the best of spirits—excited over going to Egypt. And as for me—well, you can imagine my feelings. In two days I was going to marry Mary. And as we sat a little apart from the others on the sofa which was to be used in the scene I felt almost dazed with the wonder of it. A carpenter was putting a finishing touch on the door; the photographer was fixing up lights. But at last we were ready and the producer took charge.

"'Now we'll run through this scene,' he began. 'Cimetti—are you ready?' Cimetti, who had just appeared, stepped forward and bowed to Mary. 'You'll open the door slowly,' went on the producer, 'and then you'll stretch out your hand with the revolver in it so that only the shadow is seen by the camera. Try that.'

"Cimetti tried it, and the lights had to be adjusted because there was a double shadow. And all this time Mary and I sat on the sofa, just utterly happy because we were near one another. The actual entrance, you see, was a separate scene into which we didn't come.

"At last we heard the camera turning, and we watched Cimetti come round the door, the revolver in his hand. It was a good entrance, splendid: it couldn't have been done better, and Mary congratulated him. Again he bowed, but for the first time a vague fear shot through me. It

seemed to me as if there was a smouldering look in his eyes: as if—— But I hadn't time to worry; it was Mary's turn now and mine. First, Cimetti alone: then Mary and I: then all three of us together in the great scene.

"'You'll get up,' said the producer, 'showing fear and horror. And you,' he said to me, 'make one step forward as if to get in front of her.'

"We tried it once, and it seemed to me as if a mocking smile had shown for a moment on Cimetti's face. But when that scene was over it was his turn to come and congratulate Mary.

"'Fine!' said the producer. 'Now for the last one.'

"The cameras were adjusted, the lights were moved, and Cimetti stayed with us, talking.

"'To-morrow is it—or the next day?' he asked. 'And a honeymoon in Egypt. How delightful—how romantic!'

"The smile glinted again, and once more a dreadful fear shot through me: a presentiment of some awful danger. And yet—what danger could there be? Here—in a film studio, surrounded by people.

"And now the producer was ready, and we ran through the final scene. We faced Cimetti, whose back was towards the camera, and on his lips the smile still lingered.

"'Hold it like that,' said the producer, 'and when I shout "Now," you will fire, Cimetti, and

you,' he said to me, 'pitch forward on your face.'

"And so we ran through it—once, twice, and still Cimetti smiled.

"'That's bully.' The producer was rubbing his hands together. 'I think, Miss Maxwell,' he went on, 'that as he falls you had better say: "Oh, God!" as you go on your knees beside him. Camera ready? Right: let's get on with it.'"

The man opposite drew a deep breath.

"And that was the end. The next few records are a little blurred in my mind. The camera started and with it the smile faded from Cimetti's face, to be replaced by the same look of diabolical hatred that I had seen that day weeks before when I had knocked him down. Only Mary and I could see it; but I think she knew as well as I did that it was no pretence this time. I think she knew as well as I did that the revolver was loaded.

"'Great!' I heard the producer's voice as if from a great distance. And then it came. Simultaneous with the 'Now' there was the crack of a revolver. I felt something sear through me: there was a roaring in my ears, and I knew nothing more."

He paused and lit a cigarette with a hand that trembled a little.

"And if the camera-man had not gone on mechanically turning the handle, it would have ended there. I should not have said what I did to Miss

Lankester to-day, for my Mary was told to show fear, too. But the photographer, dazed by what had happened, went on winding automatically. And the police took the result.

"I saw it six months later when I came out of hospital—still more dead than alive. And when I saw it I wished that Cimetti's aim had been truer in my case. I saw myself facing him: I saw Mary standing beside me. And then, my friend—for the camera doesn't lie—I saw the scene played as it should have been—not as the producer thought it should have been. It was Mary who tried to step in front of me, even as he fired. And then—she didn't say 'Oh, God!' and fall beside me. No: she faced Cimetti for the half second in which she lived with contempt, indifference and indomitable courage. Of fear there was no trace—no vestige.

"And that was the way that Mary died. I think he shot her through the heart, and she fell on top of me as I lay at her feet, covering me with her dear arms. Then the devil shot himself."

He fell silent, and I was silent, too: there seemed to be nothing to say.

"I don't think now that I shall be long in joining her," he went on after a while. "My money is gone: I've dropped out of sight in the film world—and I'm not strong. Cimetti's bullet did that for me, though it failed to kill me as I would have wished. And Mary—my Mary is calling me to go

to her. She wants our honeymoon in Egypt. I think I should have gone before, but I heard our film—Mary's and mine—had been sold to another company, and I wanted to see it before I met Mary again. You see, I must tell her how they've done it: she'll be interested."

And with that he was gone. It seemed to me as if he had seen someone in the street that he knew, but when I followed him to the door he was walking rapidly towards Shaftesbury Avenue alone. And yet was he alone—or was he talking to someone who walked at his side—someone I could not see? The street lamps play strange tricks with one's sight, and maybe it was just my imagination.

It was Bordini himself who looked at me significantly as I paid my bill.

"He always leaves like that—quite suddenly," he said. "Just as if someone had passed the door whom he wanted to overtake. And often the street is empty at the time."

And then he tapped his head.

I wonder. Some day, when I have time, I shall make it my business to find out.

THAT one may frequently judge a man's character by his outward appearance is true: that one's judgment is frequently wrong is even truer. The man of great bulk with a voice like a bull is found on trial to have the courage of a louse; whilst the pale, slight specimen goes through the test with a will of tempered steel. And people are surprised—why, it is difficult to see. The best looking apples are often the rottenest inside.

Which preamble is by way of introduction to John Septimus Flynn, fifth clerk in the office of Morgan and Son, who were and still are wholesale people for something or other down in the City. He was called fifth clerk principally to distinguish him from the office-boy, who received two shillings a week less than Septimus. And that difference was a very fair indication of the difference of their respective responsibilities. They both did odd jobs in the office, such as addressing envelopes; they both did odd jobs outside in the errand line. But Septimus, by reason of that extra two shillings a week, was entrusted with any private errands unconnected with the business, which Mr. Morgan or his son might wish carried out during the course of the day. From which it will be seen that John

Septimus Flynn's position in the scheme of things was not such as would entitle him to expect an invitation to a Foreign Office reception.

In appearance he had not been smiled on by nature. In fact the third and fourth clerks openly alluded to him as a freak, a description which was unkind and yet not altogether unjustified. Short and undersized in body, he possessed an abnormally large head, which looked the more grotesque owing to his habit of wearing collars at least half-an-inch too high. His hair was sandy, his complexion muddy, and an addiction to Woodbine cigarettes had stained his fingers to a bright orange. In short, it must be admitted that John Septimus was an unprepossessing young man, who would have been frankly impossible but for one strange asset.

It is doubtful if that asset would ever have been noticed by his fellow clerks—a city office is a prosaic place—but for the fact that one afternoon a great painter who was a great artist as well came in to see Mr. Morgan. It happened that he had to pass the desk where Septimus Flynn was busy addressing envelopes. And Septimus Flynn was not addressing envelopes: he was staring out of the window over the smoky roofs towards the sun, which was setting in a riot of golden glory, splashed with pinky grey. In the distance the silver streak of the Thames shone and glittered with a thousand fires, while a barge, moving slowly down-stream

towards the open sea, seemed to be gliding through a lake of liquid light.

For a moment or two the visitor paused by the desk, while the clerk, who should have been addressing envelopes, utterly oblivious of his presence, continued to stare out of the window. Then, in a very quiet, gentle voice, the great painter spoke.

"What are you looking at, my boy?"

And Septimus Flynn, his mind all eternity away, answered:

"God."

Then with a sudden start he came back to reality, and the scarlet mounted in waves to his face. A clerk at the next desk tittered, and in an agony of shame, Septimus turned feverishly to his envelopes. What had he said it for: why had he given away his great and wonderful secret? To be laughed at by these others. . . . To be held up to ridicule. . . .

But there was no laughter on the face of the grave-eyed man who stood by his desk, only a faintly-puzzled frown. Not at the somewhat unexpected answer, but at the utterly unexpected change which a second or two had wrought in the answerer. This young man with the stained fingers licking envelopes was merely a rather dreadful nonentity: a few moments before he had been—what?

"Mr. Morgan is waiting to see you, sir."

The voice of the chief clerk at his elbow recalled the painter to the object of his visit, and he turned to follow his guide.

"It's his eyes, of course." So ran his thoughts as he steered his way through desks. "They're the most marvellous things I've ever seen. They're the eyes of a God-given genius."

He found himself shaking hands absent-mindedly with Mr. Morgan—a prosperous individual whose waistcoat measurements were beginning to be the subject of earnest thought on the part of his tailor.

"Good afternoon, Sir John." Mr. Morgan pulled forward a chair. "So glad you've come round."

"Tell me, Mr. Morgan," said the great painter, "what is the name of the funny little man in the office out there with the wonderful eyes?"

Mr. Morgan gazed at him in amazement.

"Wonderful eyes! I haven't an idea. Never noticed anything of that sort myself. Bennett, have we got a clerk with wonderful eyes?"

"I think Sir John means Flynn, sir," said the chief clerk from the door. "He spoke to him coming through the office."

The painter nodded.

"That's the one I mean. Flynn: strange, very strange indeed."

"I've never noticed his eyes," laughed Mr. Morgan. "He's a funny little man, as you said

yourself, and he's a damned bad clerk. We use him to run errands."

And with that the subject dropped, though, in the office, it was not forgotten. From then onwards Septimus Flynn was known as the funny little man with the wonderful eyes. At the slightest deviation from duty his seniors waxed sarcastic and alluded to his *beaux yeux ;* the office boy contented himself with pointed references to his bally blinkers. And as time went on Flynn grew to hate the man who had unwittingly been the cause of it all, and retired more and more within himself—to the secret which was all that made life worth living.

He hated the office routine—had hated it from the first—but what else was there for him to do ? Man cannot live on dreams alone—not even his dreams, where strange haunting thoughts came to him, and he strove to catch them ere they faded and write them down on paper. The room at home—it was little more than a garret—was where he dreamed most often. In the night sometimes they would come to him, floating into his brain almost as if a voice was speaking. And then he would get out of bed, and seize a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper and write until the voice ceased, when he would creep back shivering between the coarse sheets and sleep like a log.

He'd oversleep himself sometimes, and his father would curse. Didn't he go to bed early enough,

and if so, why the devil didn't he get up in the morning? Did he want a valet to call him? And the boy didn't dare to say that he had been awake half the night scribbling feverishly on leaves torn from a penny note-book—leaves now locked away in a tin money-box hidden under the bed.

And then there had come that awful night when in some inexplicable way his father had found him out. He hadn't time to do anything: he was caught *in flagrante delicto* burning a candle at 2 a.m. with the precious money-box open by his side.

"So this is why you're late in the morning, is it?" His father, in a towering rage, had stalked into the room while he cowered back trembling. "What's all this drivel you're writing?" He had picked up two or three of the sheets, and broken into derisive laughter as he read them. "If you paid a little more attention to your work in the office, and a little less to this twaddle, you'd be earning a bit more money."

With that he had crammed the lot in his pocket and left the room with a final Parthian shot:

"They'll do for the fire to-morrow morning."

And that night Septimus Flynn sobbed himself to sleep.

But he didn't stop writing. As well try and stem the flow of a mountain torrent as check the thoughts that came flooding into his brain. And

when they came he felt he must write ; it was a physical necessity. He took more care now : his father had never discovered him again. But as his father was firmly under the impression that he was partially mad, and had long given up all hope of his being anything but the family idiot, it didn't occur to him that Septimus was less and less at home. And had he been told that his son might be seen every evening sitting on the grass in the park gazing dreamily up at the sky and occasionally scribbling in a little note-book ; had he been aware that the best part of a month's wages had gone in the purchase of a really good electric torch which could be used under the bedclothes and extinguished in an instant, he would doubtless have regarded the facts as symptoms of lunacy. But he didn't know and he didn't care—and Septimus Flynn dreamed on undisturbed. The awful routine at the office was just a necessary evil to be got through : a hideous break in all that counted in life. He was living within himself ; nothing and nobody else mattered.

And so it might have gone on for years, had not an incident occurred which altered the whole outlook of Septimus Flynn's life. In view of that extra two shillings, he was always entrusted, as has been said, with private errands for Mr. Morgan or his son. And it so happened that one morning in June, Mrs. Morgan, having a very particular luncheon party at the house in Hampstead, had

ordered her spouse to call in on his way to the office at a certain celebrated fruit shop in Piccadilly, and tell them to send up some of their choicest Muscatel grapes. Which order had completely passed out of Mr. Morgan's head until he suddenly recollected it at about twelve o'clock. For a moment he thought of telephoning to the shop ; then, realising the time and knowing the habits of errand-boys, he bethought him of Flynn.

" Go at once," he said when Flynn stood before him, " to Abraham's, in Piccadilly, and buy three pounds of their best Muscatel grapes. Take a taxi. Then go on up to my house in Hampstead. Be there with the grapes by one. Here's two pounds, and get a move on."

He arrived, to be exact, at a quarter to one, and, as he ascended the steps to the front door, it suddenly opened and a girl came out. She stopped as she saw Septimus and gave a little exclamation of relief.

" At last ! Why are you so dreadfully late ? I was just going out to buy some locally."

" Mr. Morgan told me one o'clock, miss," stammered Septimus, handing her the grapes.

" Aren't you from Abraham's ? "

" No, miss ; I'm one of Mr. Morgan's clerks."

" Oh ! I see." The girl smiled slightly. " Daddy forgot, as usual, I suppose." And then her smile grew more kindly as she saw the look on the face of the peculiar little man who was standing

first on one foot and then on the other, staring at her. She was used to male adoration, though it was not generally quite so obviously expressed as in this case. And she was also a dear, who hated to hurt anyone's feelings. So she gave Septimus a smile that two or three men would have crossed England to obtain, and held out her hand.

"Thank you so much; you've saved me such a horrid walk."

Then with a little nod she turned away and the door shut behind her, while Septimus stumbled blindly down the steps into the drive. His head was buzzing, his brain was reeling, he was unconscious of where he went or how. He got into a tube somewhere, vaguely conscious that he had heavily bumped an immaculately dressed young man who swore at him, and then came a kind of dim recollection that one to two was his lunch time—which gave him more than an hour to dream of this marvellous being whom he had spoken to. Never in his wildest imagination had he pictured anything so wonderfully lovely as this girl. And seeing that many men who had known the women of five continents would have been inclined to concur with his judgment, Septimus Flynn's state of mind was not surprising.

Denise Morgan *was* a gloriously pretty girl. She was the apple of old Morgan's eye, who refused her nothing, and yet she remained quite unspoiled. She had not quite made up her mind as to which

of two men it was going to be—Toby Carstairs in the Coldstream, or George Temple, who had a big property in Shropshire, though she rather tended to Toby.

Certainly he looked a very pleasing specimen of humanity as he came into the room a few minutes after Septimus Flynn had gone.

"I'm early, old thing," he remarked as he shook hands. "But I was very nearly outed down the road there. A thing that looked like a newt was running round in small circles, muttering horribly, and he butted me in the stomach."

"I wonder if it was the funny little man who brought the grapes," said Denise, with a smile. "I think my appearance rather overcame him."

"By Gad! he's forgiven. Death no longer threatens him. I habitually do it myself after leaving you."

And with that the conversation turned to other topics, while the thing that looked like a newt was feverishly scribbling illegible words, in a train that rocked and swayed towards Piccadilly Circus.

Thus was Septimus Flynn's life altered. Before that never-to-be-forgotten day, women and girls had been to him as men were—other occupants of that material world which he got away from whenever he could. Now he escaped more often still, but never alone. Always there came with him into his land of dreams a wonderful girl in a white dress, who sat beside him as he wrote, and who

listened with a tender smile while he read to her. Sometimes he touched her hand, and once—but this was when he had been asleep—he had kissed her. He woke up immediately after, trembling all over, and it was then that the amazing—the staggering idea was born. Supposing he could actually read to her: supposing that that part of his dream came true. Supposing he could touch her hand: supposing he could—but even the bare thought of kissing that divine girl drove him out of bed to sit by the open window and watch the first grey tints of dawn spreading over the sky.

It was impossible, of course—and yet was it? Somehow he felt she would understand. And as he squeezed himself into his appalling collar the next morning, there came to him the dazzling vision of life spent beside her, a life where they dreamed together of those things which the others couldn't understand. Poor, funny little man!

But as with most dreams, it is the practical realisation that counts. And the practical realisation of this one presented slight difficulties. The first, of which Septimus was not aware, lay in the fact that the girl had completely forgotten his existence. The second, of which he was fully aware, was that it was one thing to watch this glorious creature drive off in a car at night from her house, when he was hidden in some bushes near by, and quite another to go and speak to her. Besides, there was generally a man with her—a

large, good-looking man with lazy blue eyes. He grew to hate this man, with a bitter hatred.

But at last the opportunity came. Morgan and Son was a conservative firm, with whom any traditions or customs died hard. And there was one particular custom which had been inaugurated by Mr. Morgan's father more than fifty years ago. It had started when the difference, both social and financial, between the head of the firm and his clerks was not anything like so pronounced as to-day, and it had continued ever since. It took place on some day in July, and consisted of a state visit of the entire staff, down to and including the office-boy, to Mr. Morgan's house in Hampstead.

It was a ghastly entertainment, but it was just one of those things that had to be. Neither side would have dreamed of dropping the habit: it was a point of honour with Mr. Morgan to ask them —it was a point of honour with the staff to accept. The function was as inexorable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

Only once had Septimus Flynn been, and then in an agony of shyness he had effaced himself in a corner. Denise had been away from home, and the wretched Septimus had shaken like an aspen leaf before the kindly but somewhat majestic Mrs. Morgan.

But this time it was going to be different: the girl was going to be there. He had been standing by the chief clerk when Mr. Morgan had issued the

command invitation, and he had distinctly heard her mentioned.

"Mrs. Morgan and my daughter will be at home on Saturday, Bennett," he had said. "Let the others know, will you. Hope they'll all be able to come."

Septimus Flynn felt his heart pound madly as he listened: he felt he could have struck the decorous Bennett for his impassive bow as he thanked his employer. Didn't the fool realise that the most wonderful girl in the world was going to be there? But the fool in question was only realising that a worthy lady whom *he* had once called the most wonderful girl in the world would undoubtedly demand another hat for the occasion. She always did.

For days before the fateful Saturday, Septimus read and re-read and selected and rejected the written dreams he was going to read to her. He had quite made up his mind what was going to happen: the whole thing was most carefully thought out. He would waylay her quite naturally in the garden somewhere, and, while the others were playing croquet or quoits, he would ask her if she liked poetry. Of course she would say yes. Then he would take her on one side and read to her a few lines; and as she began to understand he would read more until he carried her away, right away with him to his land of dreams. And finally, a little breathless, she would ask him who had

written it, and he would tell her, in that great culminating moment. Beyond that Septimus Flynn's imagination failed to carry him. Dimly he visualised countless days where the same thing would happen, but just at the moment it was Saturday only that counted. He couldn't get much beyond that.

It is doubtful if any bride ever dressed for her wedding day with the same care as Septimus expended on his toilet after lunch. A green butterfly tie with a distinctive yellow marking was adjusted with meticulous accuracy in the centre of a three-inch turn-down collar: a Norfolk jacket with a strap round the waist, pale grey trousers, and light brown boots finally formed a picture not easily forgotten. And when to this were added wash-leather gloves, an imitation ebony stick with a bone top, and a bowler with the bow at the back, it will be readily conceded that, as far as outward appearances were concerned, Septimus was leaving nothing to chance. He arrived a little early, and put through the time walking up and down the big avenue that led to the tube station. Once or twice, as he passed a certain tree, behind which he had sometimes stood to watch the girl go out to dinner or a dance, he gave a little smile of amused contentment. That was all over now: after this afternoon that absurd performance would never occur again.

A familiar figure hove in sight walking with a

woman. They were coming from the station, and Septimus, descending to earthly levels again, recognised the chief clerk, Mr. Bennett. As he came nearer it was obvious that he was not in the best of tempers: to be exact, there had been a slight contretemps over the new hat, and Mrs. Bennett had shown a fluency of utterance at the midday meal which had astonished even him.

"Good God! Flynn!" he almost shouted, "what the devil are you doing in that rig? This isn't a fancy dress ball."

At any other time Mrs. Bennett would have backed him up, but the question of the hat still rankled.

"I think you look very nice, Mr. Flynn," she remarked sweetly. "Mr. Bennett seems to imagine he's the only person in England who knows anything about clothes."

She smiled graciously and sailed on, while her husband followed, muttering darkly. And as for Septimus, what did he care? *She* would not bother over such trifles.

He waited for a few minutes after the Bennetts had disappeared: then, with a last final feeling in his pocket to make sure the precious papers were safe, he, too, rang the bell.

The butler opened the door, and stood staring for an appreciable time. Then, with his hand over his mouth and his shoulders shaking, he led the way through the hall to the door that led into the garden.

"Through there," he remarked tersely. "Mrs. Morgan is in the garden."

For a moment or two Septimus stood bewildered, until he saw his hostess in the distance. A voice at his side—it was the office-boy surreptitiously eating chocolates—"Crumps! You don't 'alf look a swell, Sep"—restored his confidence, and he walked across the lawn to Mrs. Morgan. And having left her in a partially dazed condition, he looked round for the girl. At first he couldn't see her: then, suddenly, he did, and the whole world went black. Standing by her side was the large, good-looking man with the lazy blue eyes—the man he hated so much. They were laughing together, and Septimus turned away, with a sick feeling of rage, to be immediately roped in for a game of golf croquet.

"But, my dear old thing," Toby Carstairs was saying between gusts of laughter, "it's incredible. I've never seen such a menagerie in my life. I know the office-boy in the corner is going to be sick in a minute—and now that other apparition—" He stared at Septimus, feverishly hitting a croquet ball. . . . "Why—it's the newt. Once seen, never forgotten. You remember that day, some weeks ago, I told you about the little bird who was running round in small circles and who butted me in the stomach. That's the little blighter himself."

"I think he's in love with me, Toby," laughed

the girl. "Poor little man: he's such a funny little fellow, too. It's a shame to laugh at him."

"My dear, how can you help it? Look at his rig. That tie! My sainted aunt!"

"Well, you asked for variety, Toby—and you've got it. After tea you've got to play quoits with the newt, and up till then you can amuse yourself. No you can't . . . you can do a job of work. Mrs. Bennett—I want to introduce Captain Carstairs—my fiancé—to you."

She heard Toby swear horribly under his breath: then with a little gurgle of laughter she left them to flounder together, while she moved about the garden, the very incarnation of sweet girlhood. Even the office-boy ceased his occupation of gorging sweets as she came near him, and gazed at her open-mouthed.

And so, in due course, she came to Septimus Flynn. The golf croquet was over, and he was sitting by himself still holding his mallet.

"I don't think I thanked you properly for bringing up those grapes," said Denise, with a smile. "It was so good of you."

Septimus dropped his mallet and rose, blushing furiously. It had all seemed so easy before—now . . .

"Not at all," he stuttered. Why couldn't he be easy and natural like that big man?

"Would you like to have another game of croquet?" she asked gently. Somehow or other

a great feeling of pity for this funny little man was taking possession of her: he seemed so extraordinarily pathetic.

"N . . . n . . . no, thank you, Miss Morgan," he stammered. "Miss M . . . Morgan, do you like poetry?"

It came out with a rush, like a bullet from a gun—this pent-up and carefully rehearsed opening to a great dream.

The girl looked a little bewildered: it was so extremely sudden, and so very unexpected.

"I love it," she answered. "Why?"

"I was wondering," he went on, with gathering confidence, "if you'd let me read you one or two things I've written."

She sternly suppressed a strong desire to laugh.

"Of course," she said gravely, "I should like to hear them immensely. But I think we'd better put it off till after tea."

With that she had left him to go and talk to one of the others, and Septimus Flynn—the first great obstacle passed—was content. Away from all this chattering crowd: away, above all, from the big man he hated: away—alone with her. It was coming true—his dream—and he felt he could hardly believe it. Half-an-hour—perhaps an hour—and it would be realised. He stared with unseeing eyes at the people playing croquet, heard with unheeding ears the click of the balls and the casual snatches of conversation around him, immersed

utterly in that strange world of his own into which so soon the girl was going to accompany him.

And it was just before tea that Toby Carstairs, having shaken the dust of Mrs. Bennett from his feet, passed close by him, and saw the look on his face. For a moment the soldier hesitated almost as if he had received some shock: then with a little shake of his shoulders he went on towards Denise.

"My God! What a bunch!" he said. "The office-boy has been sick: that woman—oh! that woman—and the newt is mad."

"How do you mean, mad?" said the girl.

"Have you seen the look in his eyes, Denise," and Toby's voice was almost serious. "He's as mad as a hatter."

Which was about as near as one could expect a singularly cheerful soldier's diagnosis of the case to agree with that of a great painter who was also a great artist.

"I don't know whether he's mad or not," answered the girl with a laugh. "But after tea he's going to read me some poetry he's written."

"Good Lord! you haven't been encouraging him, have you?"

"No, he suggested it himself. I should think it ought to be one long scream."

"I'm going to come and listen, too," announced Toby.

"You are not," said the girl. "You'd put the poor little chap completely off his stride. But if

you promise to be good, and not laugh, I'll take him to the little summer-house and you can hide somewhere and look on."

And so the dream came true. It was just Fate; no one was to blame for the *dénouement*. But there are times, even now, when Toby Carstairs falls into a deep reverie, and his big fists clench, and into his eyes there steals a look of dreadful pain, such as a man feels who has hurt a child unwittingly. And then his wife comes to him, and puts her arms around his neck, till after a while he shakes himself like a dog, and swears a little and goes out to walk it off. It was just Fate, and yet . . .

Only once have I heard him speak of it, and that was one night after we'd dined together at the club. And it was what he told me then, in short, jerky sentences, that led me to find out from other sources the few scanty pegs on which I have hung the story of Septimus Flynn.

"Denise took him into the summer-house"—Toby bit the end of his cigar—"and I, like the damned fool I was, hid in some bushes close by. You know the way she's got with her, and he—poor little devil—was stammering and stuttering like a board-school child in front of a bishop. He got redder and redder in the face, and that ghastly green tie, with yellow spots, had slipped round to the back of his neck somewhere. Then he fished a bit of paper out of his pocket and started to read.

I couldn't hear a word he said—I don't think Denise did either—for I wasn't much farther away from him than she was. . . ."

Toby paused, and drained his brandy at a gulp.

"And then I laughed. . . . There's no excuse, Bill—none: I laughed. If it hadn't ended as it did, I suppose I should say that he was such an irresistibly funny sight that I couldn't help it. I laughed—and he heard me."

Once again Toby Carstairs paused, and I didn't hurry him.

"I'm not a poetic sort of bloke," he went on gravely, "but I didn't need to be that to realise what I'd done. He swung round as if he'd been hit in the face, and he saw me. I tried to pass it off—but he never looked at me again. He just looked at Denise, and she said hurriedly: "This is my fiancé, Mr. Flynn. Do go on."

"But it wasn't any good. I don't know what he'd thought before—poor little blighter; but I suppose it suddenly came to him that he was being made a fool of. And he just gave a cry like an animal that has been hurt, and bolted."

Toby took a long breath.

"They brought it in as an accident," he continued after a while. "He went down in front of a train on one of the tubes—that evening. Slipped—according to the onlookers. His father at the inquest said he'd always been a bit queer."

He rose and shook himself.

"Did you ever see any of the stuff he'd written?" I asked curiously.

"No. Though, strangely enough, I believe Sir John Drayton—the painter man—went down to see the father, and tried to get some. But the father had burnt the lot. . . . Tripe, I suppose, of sorts—there's no doubt he was a little bit up the pole. You'd only got to look at his eyes to spot that. . . ."

I wonder: poor, funny little man. . . .

"ONE thing that has always struck me," began the Soldier, carefully cutting the end of his cigar, "is the misconception that exists in most civilian minds with regard to ragging in the Army.

"I don't know whether it goes on now; most senior subalterns to-day have only got about three years' service themselves, and therefore fail to carry the necessary weight to make a subaltern's court-martial effective. But in the days before the War, when fellows waited nine or ten years for their third star, there were occasional cases when they took the law into their own hands in a manner hardly legislated for by the King's Regulations.

"Sometimes, of course, things got into the papers, or relatives kicked up a row, and the matter had to be taken up officially.

"'Fair Play' would write an impassioned appeal to the *Daily Screamer* that, though he had no knowledge of any of the parties concerned, did the people of England realise that a monstrous act of tyrannical bullying had been perpetrated on a harmless and inoffensive boy by a band of heartless brother-officers, merely because he had been guilty

of the crime of studying his profession. This boy had been forced to leave his regiment by circumstances of revolting cruelty, which brought a flush of shame to the cheeks even of the most callous—etcetera, etcetera. And 'Fair Play' then probably kicked the office cat, and departed home full of righteous indignation to abuse his wife's housekeeping.

"Which is by the way, but in all seriousness I can say that I have never during my service—and it's a fairly lengthy one—heard of any single ragging case, certainly any serious one, which was not justified when tested by the one vital, acid question. 'Was it for the good of the regiment?'

"You fellows are civilians; if you dislike some man you merely avoid him, and you certainly don't bring him to your house and introduce him to your wife. But in a regiment or a battalion you can't avoid him; he's like the poor, an ever-present reality. It's different even in a show like the Gunners or the Sappers, where you may serve with a man for three years and never see him again; it's very different in the Navy, when one need never know if a fellow is even married.

"But in a battalion or a cavalry regiment the officers are a family, and the prospect of twenty years, say, with an uncongenial member in that family is not one to be viewed with equanimity.

"Of course, the best regiments took great care

as to who joined them, but accidents will happen. And the yarn I'm going to spin you to-night concerns an accident which happened in the first battalion of the Royal Loamshires, than which, it is unnecessary to state, no better regiment exists in the British Army.

"It was some two or three years before the War when a young gentleman whom I will call Thompson joined that battalion. They were stationed at Shorncliffe, and had one more year to go before commencing their foreign tour. I was on the Staff there at the time, and, being unmarried, I used to mess with them. They were a priceless crowd from the Colonel downwards, and their senior subaltern, Giles Laming, was one of God's elect. The men were magnificent, as one would expect with such officers; in fact, the battalion was the apple of the General's eye.

"To this unit, then, one bright and sunny afternoon there arrived Mr. Thompson, resplendent with his new kit and clad in very beautiful mufti.

"Only the orderly officer witnessed the actual advent of the newcomer; everybody else was playing games with the men, and he, after taking dubious stock of the latest acquisition, proceeded to try and make him feel at home. I say dubious advisedly. Thompson was not a prepossessing youth. Nature had endowed him with a somewhat sallow face, generously sprinkled with pimples, and also with the small size in bodies.

"Far be it from me to imply that small, pimply-faced youths cannot rise to supreme heights; I merely state that they start at a disadvantage. And when I inspected him dispassionately that night at dinner I felt bound to concur with Giles Laming's horror-struck ejaculation: 'Great Scot! has old Pumpkin been on the drink?'

"Old Pumpkin, I may state, was an officer in the Loamshires, temporarily an instructor at Sandhurst, whose principal job was to get all prospective candidates for the regiment.

"I have it on good authority that within a week Pumpkin received over fifteen threatening letters from the battalion, warning him what would occur the next time he showed his face in the mess.

"He wrote fifteen conciliatory replies, and then arrived in person.

"'What the deuce were you about, Pumpkin?' roared Giles as soon as he came into the ante-room, at a time when Thompson was engaged on the barrack square doing drill.

"'My dear old Giles,' wailed Pumpkin, 'I swear to Heaven I am innocent of all evil. The little swine has got a father who is assistant secretary to the Ministry of Midwives or something, and Hatchet-face wouldn't listen to reason.'

"Hatchet-face, I may say, was the deciding arbiter of such matters at Sandhurst.

"'But he's utterly impossible,' cried Giles angrily.

"'I know he is,' answered Pumpkin plaintively, 'and his father is far, far worse. You wouldn't believe what his father is like. I think he's the most dreadful man I have ever seen. But he's got influence, and he was absolutely determined on his son coming to us.

"'I assure you I burst into floods of tears when I first heard about it. I rushed round making love to every woman I thought could help, and making my trousers baggy kneeling to their husbands. And they laughed in my face—they positively laughed in my face. As you see, I'm worn away to a shadow.'

"He maintained an air of dignity at the burst of unfeeling laughter which greeted the last item of information, and rang the bell for a drink.

"'But what the devil are we to do about it?' demanded Giles peevishly.

"'Heaven knows, old man!' said the Pumpkin with a profound sigh. 'I can only assure you on my word of honour that young Thompson is immeasurably the worst cadet that the Royal Military College of Sandhurst has had since it was founded some centuries ago. The oldest living servant there, whose great-grandfather blacked the Young Pretender's boots, is reputed to have said that there was a record in his family of an even more dreadful youth passing out of the College. But he was stabbed on sight by the sentry of the regiment he

was to join before he could even enter the barracks. And anyway I can hardly believe it. Gin and angostura, please.'

"And a gloomy and depressing silence settled on the mess, broken only by a chair collapsing as the Pumpkin sat down in it."

The Soldier smiled reminiscently as he poured himself out a whisky-and-soda.

"They were very fair to young Thompson; they gave him every chance, but it was useless. Far from improving, he grew worse. At Sandhurst he had been more or less made to conform to the standard code by the system; in the regiment there were, of necessity, hours during the day when he was his own master. And the way a youngster spends his leisure is a very good test as to the manner of fellow he is.

"Sufficient to say that Thompson emerged badly from the test. He had a certain amount of money—considerably more than was advisable for a youth of his characteristics. And Shorncliffe, though an excellent station, is dangerously near Folkestone for a fledgling with the wrong ideas. There are too many bars in Folkestone—and too many barmaids, for a boy of that type. And instead of playing games, which he did only under compulsion, and very badly at that, Thompson became a pronounced bar loafer. He also poodle-faked to excess with the wrong people, which, for the benefit of the uninitiated, may be interpreted

as implying that he consumed buns to excess in the boudoirs of doubtful females. And there was only a year before the regiment went abroad.

"Now, to remove an officer officially, as you may know, necessitates three adverse annual reports from his commanding officer. It therefore takes three years, a period which Giles Laming, for one, flatly refused to contemplate.

"'To have it in the regiment for that time is impossible,' he remarked to me, 'but to take it abroad with us is simply inconceivable. We shall have to take the law into our own hands.'

"True to his resolve, he started the good work that night after dinner. The author of the trouble was adorning the ante-room, and Giles, after surveying him in silence for a time, led off in style:

"'And how do you like the Army, Thompson?'

"'All right, thank you,' answered Thompson, somewhat surprised. I don't think I've mentioned that the youth had a skin quite impervious to snubs.

"'And do you propose to stay in the Army, Thompson?' pursued Giles.

"Thompson looked even more surprised. 'Why, of course. What do you mean, Giles?'

"Laming frowned, but said nothing. Like most of us, he detested being called by his Christian name promiscuously.

"'What I mean is this, Thompson,' he continued quietly. 'We have given you four months' trial, and we do not consider that the Army will benefit by your continued presence. There are, no doubt, many other fields of activity which would become you; we suggest you should seek one out. And so I thought I'd tell you that, should you decide to send in your papers, there will be no difficulty about their going through—er—expeditiously.

"'To speak quite frankly, we do not like you or your ways, and the men do not, either. So I suggest to you that it would be pleasanter for all concerned if you went.'

"Which was straight and to the point, and one would have thought enough for the ordinary person. But not for young Thompson. Under the epidermis of a rhinoceros, he hid the obstinacy of a mule—and to resign his commission he flatly refused. Nor would he consider the question of trying to transfer to another regiment. He was in the Royal Loamshires, and in the Royal Loamshires he intended to stay. Moreover, he was so incredibly foolish as to hold up his father's position and influence as things which had better not be trifled with; to hint, in other words, that his brother-officers had better be careful what they did. It was one of the few occasions on which I ever saw Giles lose his temper.

"'For that little pimply blotch to threaten us!'

he said to me afterwards. 'Threaten! Great Scot! It's time we stopped talking. We'll start off with a subaltern's court-martial, and charge him with the crime of having been born.'

"But, as luck would have it, they managed to get a better charge than that. The one form of exercise to which young Thompson was addicted was sailing. He had a small boat of his own, and he frequently spent the afternoon cruising about, generally accompanied by some undesirable female acquaintance.

"And the very afternoon of the day on which it had been decided to hold the subaltern's court-martial after mess, our hero went forth in his boat and upset. He was rescued by a boatman, along with his sopping and enraged lady pal, and was rowed to the shore, where he presented his rescuer with a pound for his trouble. Which occurrence having duly reached the ears of one Giles Laming, that worthy smiled beatifically and murmured: 'The Lord hath delivered him into our hands. I will prosecute.'

"Now, a subaltern's court-martial is not altogether a jest. It may be, and generally is, conducted with apparent good-humour, but underlying it is the very definite certainty that the accused had been tried at the bar of public opinion and found wanting in some respect. Everything depends on what that respect is. If it's something really dirty and unpleasant, the tone of the

proceedings will not be good-humoured; if, as in the case of young Thompson, the something is just general dislike, the proceedings will be conducted more or less as a rag.

"But, in any case, it is advisable for the accused to enter into the spirit of the thing to the best of his ability. If he cuts up nasty, the sentence of the Court is apt to be considerably influenced by the fact.

"Young Thompson cut up nasty from the beginning in the most foolish of ways. He became sullen—and an undersized, pimply youth who is sullen into the bargain is one of the least prepossessing sights in the world. Giles, as prosecutor, practically ran the proceedings, of course; and I, being privileged, attended in the rôle of spectator. Otherwise, no one above the rank of subaltern was present.

"He was tried on two charges: first—Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline in that he at Folkestone that afternoon had interfered with the dictates of Providence, which had clearly intended him to be drowned; and second—Conduct unseemly in an officer and a gentleman in that he on the same occasion had dared to value his life at such an extortionate figure as one pound.

"Needless to say, he was found guilty on both charges, and the sentence of the Court was that he should be placed in a hip bath outside the mess,

unfettered by such trifles as garments, and that a second hip bath should then be placed on top of him to hide such a horrible spectacle from the world. Further, that for the space of ten minutes he should so manipulate the top bath as to give a creditable imitation of an oyster, during which ten minutes the humane onlookers would feed the hungry mollusc.

"I think the principal articles of diet were tennis balls," grinned the Soldier; "propelled, fortunately for Thompson, with more force than accuracy, and then someone arrived with the garden hose. The pressure was good, the aim was excellent, and every time the top bath lifted, a jet of water shot through the opening. I remember the Colonel emerged from the mess and hurriedly retired again on seeing what was happening; there are things of which it is well for the Commanding Officer to remain in official ignorance."

The Soldier paused for a moment to relight his cigar.

"And there the matter would have ended in normal circumstances," he continued, when it was drawing to his satisfaction. "Unfortunately, young Thompson was not a normal circumstance. In school parlance he sneaked to Papa, and Papa raised Cain. His son, an officer in the Army, had been subjected to this monstrous indignity, and he demanded that disciplinary action should be taken against all and sundry. He worried

Secretaries of State, and since, of course, he was legally within his rights in demanding that action should be taken, action had to be taken.

"I was on the Staff at the time, as I told you, and it came through me—all the correspondence. An inquiry was immediately to be held and a full report rendered with regard to the alleged case of bullying of Second Lieutenant John Thompson by officers of the 1st Battalion Royal Loamshires. I took it to my General, of course, who was of the salt of the earth, and never as long as I live shall I forget his language with regard to politicians. I told him exactly what had taken place, and his only regret was that he hadn't been there to see. Then he became serious, and swore steadily again till his breath gave out.

"'Ring up Tiny Tim,' he told me, 'and tell him to come and see me at once.'

"Tiny Tim was the Colonel, and up he came on the spot.

"'Tiny,' said the General, 'there's the devil to pay. Look at this.'

"'What's that, sir?' said Tim, and then his jaw dropped as he glanced at the letter, and his face grew a little tense. Tiny wasn't a wealthy man, and he was a mad, keen soldier. He'd only three more years to go in command, and he'd been too long in the service not to know that an affair of this sort wasn't going to help his chance of becoming a Brigadier-General. But there it

was, and there was no getting out of it. The Powers that Be at the War Office had demanded an inquiry, and an inquiry there had to be.

"The General did everything that a man could do, and a bit more besides. He had a good deal of influence himself, and he pulled every string he could think of. He had heart-to-heart talks with the big War House people at the Rag and the Senior, and always he came up against the same brick wall—old Thompson. If it had been anyone else—anyone; but the fellow was hand in glove with the Cabinet. That was the deciding factor—the influence of the young cub's father. And incidentally he gathered that the mule-like obstinacy of the son had not been inherited from the maternal side.

"It was toned down as much as possible—that report; the whole thing was continually and emphatically alluded to as a mere boyish escapade—the result of high spirits. And the magnificent efficiency of the regiment was emphasised. But do what one could, the one hard fact emerged that young Thompson had been stripped, placed in a bath in a public position, bombarded with tennis balls, and soused with the garden hose. And for this outrage to the family pride Papa Thompson claimed his pound of flesh, while the pup gloated openly in the mess.

"He was put in coventry, of course, but during the days when the verdict was being awaited even

I, an outsider, would willingly have murdered him with my own hands.

"Then the men got to know of it; there are mighty few things in a regiment the men don't know, and it was perhaps unfortunate for young Thompson that the two officers of the battalion who could have asked the men to lie down and be walked on were Tiny Tim and Giles Laming. Unfortunate, because when Thomas really dislikes an officer—God help him! They rag him mercilessly; they make his life a hell in ways too subtle to explain.

"But it wasn't until the result of the matter was made known that things began to hum. When the men discovered that Tiny Tim had got it in the neck officially, and pretty badly in the neck, too, they got annoyed; but when they found out that their adored Giles had forfeited two years' seniority they got angry. Officially, no one knows who did it, of course, though Peter Strudwick, who had a room not far from young Thompson and was on the sick list, heard strange noises during dinner one night, and went to his door and looked out. And he was a discreet lad, was Peter. The urgent summons he sent to his pals to come and cheer him up was just a coincidence. But the fact remains that several officers of the Royal Loamshires, their faces purple with suppressed laughter, watched young Thompson open his door. Then he disappeared from view, as a

flock of twenty sheep passed over his prostrate form.

" ' Private Gregory, of A Company, was the ringleader,' sobbed Peter. ' I heard the most awful shindy and looked out of my door, when I promptly got butted in the stomach by a large sheep which Gregory was trying to hold by the wool. The passage was crammed with 'em—sheep all over the place. Gregory stared at me speechlessly and let go of his animal.

" ' 'Oly smoke, boys ! ' he said, ' we've been and gone and done it now.' ' Private Gregory,' I remarked, ' I thought I saw sheep in this passage, I must be delirious.' That's when his brute knocked me down backwards, and only the combined efforts of Gregory and his pals enabled me to get my door shut, with the sheep outside and me in.'

" But the finishing touch to young Thompson's military career occurred at the regimental sports. A Very Exalted Person was present—he was Colonel-in-Chief of the regiment, and by some extraordinary fluke young Thompson secured a prize in a running race. Every prize-winner, of course, got rounds of applause, and Giles, who had won the horse-jumping competition open to all comers, got a reception from the men that nearly deafened one. Then came young Thompson's turn, and for the only occasion in my life, I felt sorry for the youth. But he'd brought it on himself ; it was entirely his own fault.

"He went up to the Very Exalted Person amidst dead silence; then some man started to bleat like a sheep. And they all took it up, every man jack of them, until the heavens resounded with baas. It was impossible to stop them, and I'm not certain that anybody wanted to very much, but it was a little awkward. Papa Thompson was there, and explanations were impossible. But the upshot of the matter was that the Very Exalted Person had a private interview with Tiny Tim. And rumour has it that he had a further interview with Papa Thompson. And, further, he was Very Exalted. Which, when all is said and done, makes young Thompson's sudden resolve to take up political work and resign his commission not quite as unexpected as it might have been.

"At any rate, a fortnight later he removed himself, bag and baggage, from Shorncliffe, and the Royal Loamshires knew him no more, to their exceeding great content, and but for the sequel, which I only heard quite recently from Giles himself, I should have known him no more either. As a matter of fact, I'm thankful to say that I never have seen him again, but Giles did when he squared the account of that lost two years' seniority.

"It was during the War that it happened, and Giles told me about it at the Rag the other night. He was courting his girl at the time, Molly Venables that was, an absolute fizzer, and it was in the early

days somewhere about the middle of 1915. He'd come home with a touch of gas, and was stopping down at old Venables' place in Berkshire, when, to his amazement, who should arrive one week-end to stay but young Thompson himself, disguised as a Major.

"'Can you beat it, Turnip,' he said to me, 'that wart-faced little brute coming in covered with green tabs as a shining light in the Intelligence. He wasn't best pleased to see me as you can guess, but he tried to carry it off with a high hand.'

"'And how is everybody?' he asked airily. 'How's the Colonel?'

"Tiny Tim, mark you, Turnip, who rode into action along the Menin road in November, '14, with a carpet slipper on one foot because he couldn't walk, and got cut in two by machine-gun fire. I nearly hit the little swine's face through the back of his head.

"'Rapid promotion to the Intelligence,' I remarked.

"'Yaas,' drawls the swab. 'They promoted me when I was invalided from France.'

"'I pushed off into the garden then with Molly,' continued Giles. 'If I hadn't I'd have thrown a lump of coal at his head. And when I got her outside I told her the whole show. She looked a bit pensive by the time I'd finished, and asked me if I was sure of my facts.'

"'Sure?' I laughed. 'Didn't I lose two years' seniority over the blighter? And, incidentally, what did he go to France with? And why was he invalided? I'll back that celebrated horse Cold Feet for a place anyway.'

"'Giles, old son,' says Molly to me, 'this requires thought. Are you aware that he is trying to persuade Phyllis to marry him?'

"'Good God!' I said. 'Phyllis! Marry that?' I tell you, Turnip, it made me cough. Phyllis was Molly's young sister, and to annex Major Thompson as a brother-in-law was a bit over the odds, as I told Molly.

"'Then we must do something,' she said. 'Phyllis is very young, and, according to him, only his innate modesty prevented his getting the V.C. in France. She isn't fond of him really, but she thinks he's wonderful. We must disabuse her mind.'

"'But how?' I said. 'If his face isn't enough, what more can we do?'

"'He's always talking about the number of Bosches he's killed,' murmured Molly pensively.

"'Rot,' I grunted. 'He's probably never seen one, except as a prisoner.'

"It was at that moment, according to Giles, that a sudden gleam appeared in Molly's eyes—a gleam which excited his curiosity. But she was adamant; she refused to say a word.

"'I have,' she informed him, 'the germ of an

idea. Run away and play ball in a corner; I would be alone.'

"So Giles ran away and played ball, and on his return found Molly deep in converse with a charming old gentleman disguised in khaki and adorned with the ribbons of well-nigh forgotten wars. Not only was she deep in converse with him, but Giles stated she was making love to him in a positively barefaced manner. And the sole result of a sprightly remark of his about the roses was to be sternly ordered to go away and play ball again.

"Half an hour later he saw Molly approaching, and frowned his sternest frown.

"'Your behaviour is reprehensible,' he remarked coldly. 'What do you mean by encouraging that poor old gentleman into such a dreadful exhibition of senile love?'

"'Isn't he a pet?' said Molly dreamily. 'I absolutely adore him. He's often up here.'

"'Hang it!' exploded Giles, and Molly smiled sweetly.

"'Had a nice little game, darling, all by your little self?' she asked. 'Do you know who that dear old man is?'

"'I don't,' said Giles, 'and I don't want to.'

"'He's the Commandant of the German Officers Prisoners of War Camp about a mile from here. Is your brain beginning to work?'

"'It is not,' said the mystified Giles. 'Why the dickens should it?'

"'That's the worst of a man,' sighed Molly resignedly. 'Always wants everything explained. I should have thought it was perfectly clear. Giles,'—she paused dramatically—'a prisoner has escaped.'

"'Well, I'm hanged if I'm going to run about the fields looking for him!' said Giles, still more mystified.

"'A prisoner has escaped,' she continued, taking no notice of this unseemly interruption, 'who is a little mad. He is not a frenzied maniac, but he has a bee in his bonnet. I explained it all to that darling old man.'

"I gather it was at this moment that Giles sat down feebly and demanded alcohol.

"'Think of it, Giles, this man is prowling over the countryside with only one idea in his mind. And do you know what that is?'

"Giles' head waggled like a recently landed fish.

"'The idea on which this partial maniac gloats and gloats is to slaughter a British officer, preferably one in the Intelligence.'

"'But, my dear girl,' gasped Giles, 'you can't rope in a Bosche and ask him up to the house to kill Thompson. And how can you find the blighter, anyway?'

"'Sometimes, Giles,' murmured Molly pen-

sively, 'I doubt my wisdom in getting engaged to you. I don't think you're quite all there. Don't you understand—no prisoner has really escaped. But this one, who hasn't escaped and yet has—even you can grasp that bit, I suppose—is exactly like you to look at.'

"And Giles was too far gone to speak.

"'I've fixed it all up with that perfect pet of a Commandant—especially the uniform. That was the difficulty. But he says you're just about the same size as Baron von Thurm or Worm or something.'

"That revived Giles.

"'Woman,' he roared, 'do you suggest that I should masquerade all over the country in von Worm's dirty uniform in order to kill Thompson?'

"'It isn't dirty; it's a new one just arrived. And you'd better not kill him—quite outright.'

"'I refuse absolutely,' said Giles firmly.

"'Then you'll have the dear boy as a brother-in-law,' remarked Molly sweetly, and Giles swore.

"Molly has a way with her, and, as she brightly pointed out, it only entailed holding up von Worm's new uniform for a few hours.

"At any rate, they did it. Molly, with a perfectly straight face, pitched the yarn at dinner to such good effect that dear old Lady Venables

nearly swooned. And after dinner Giles disappeared, while Molly—growing suddenly affectionate towards young Thompson—insisted on his coming out with her into the garden. And Phyllis, too.

"'Think,' she said ecstatically, 'you might catch this horrid Bosche. Wouldn't it be lovely?'

"'I'll put it across the brute, if I see him,' said young Thompson valiantly—and at that psychological moment a large German officer stepped out of the bush on to the path in front of them, and gave forth a demoniacal laugh.

"The girls screamed, young Thompson smiled wanly at the moon, and the German officer produced a revolver. As Giles said to me, the difficulty was that he didn't know a word of German except 'Schweinhund,' and he didn't know how to spell that. But he said it twice in a deep voice, and laughed again. Then he raised his revolver—and it was enough. With a scream of pure terror, young Thompson fled. He fled blindly, and paused not till he reached the house, where the girls found him a few minutes later.

"'Is that how you killed the Germans, Major Thompson?' asked Phyllis with biting scorn. She, I may say, was still in ignorance of the little scheme.

"'But isn't it wonderful how quickly he runs, Phyllis?' said Molly sweetly. 'Didn't you win a

prize for it once, Major Thompson? At some regimental sports?'

"And it was just then that Major Thompson's face turned a deep puce colour, and he plucked at his collar. For from the darkness outside there came a strange sound—the sound of the bleating of a sheep."

For the twentieth time Hilda Garling asked herself the same question—Why had her husband asked Jack Denver to stay? Mechanically she helped herself to some dish which the footman was handing to her, hardly knowing what it was she took. Why had he asked Jack to stay?

Such a thing was so completely foreign to her husband's habits of late. For the last year or so he had grown more and more of a recluse, shutting himself away for hours and even days at a time, and having his meals served in his own room, until the big house standing back from the Portsmouth road had seemed a veritable prison to his wife. Not that it was much better when her husband did come out of his seclusion, but at any rate he was a human being of her own class.

She had tried asking people to stay, but it wasn't a success. When your host plainly shows you that your presence fails to amuse him, even the most thick-skinned guest begins to look up the trains for London. She had tried going away to stay with friends, but that was only a temporary panacea. And then a year ago even that relief had been denied her. Her husband had complained once or twice of a pain in the chest, and

although he scouted the idea that it was anything but indigestion, he at length agreed to do as she wished and send for a doctor. And the doctor had spoken to her after his examination.

"Mrs. Garling," he said, "I am sorry to have to be the bearer of—I won't say bad, but of serious news. It is no mere question of indigestion, I fear. It is heart trouble—and it is pronounced. Please understand me. There is no reason, if your husband lives a quiet life and avoids excitement or undue exertion of all sorts, why he shouldn't live for another twenty or thirty years. But any sudden physical call on his system—and the chances are, I am afraid, that it would kill him."

"Have you told my husband?" she asked him.

"Not quite as clearly as I have told you," answered the doctor. "But he is fully aware that his condition is more serious than he thought."

From that time on she had hardly ever slept a night away from the Pines. For Hilda Garling had the instinct of playing the game very fully developed. It was hypocrisy to pretend to herself that she loved him: looking back on the five years of their married life she realised that she never had loved him. Like so many girls fresh from the schoolroom, she had been captivated by a brilliantly clever and handsome man some fourteen years older than herself. She had thought herself in love with him, and her parents, having inquired into Hubert Garling's social and financial status,

and having found both—especially the latter—eminently satisfactory, had put no obstacle in the way of what seemed to them a very desirable match.

But even before the honeymoon was over disillusion had begun to set in. That Hubert had a jealous nature she had found out while they were engaged, and then she had been rather flattered by it. But until they were married she never realised how fiendishly jealous he was. Once at Nice, as they were on their way home, she had danced twice with a young French officer, and the scene that night in their room had been appalling. It had blown over, as such scenes do, but it had left an indelible mark. It had frightened the girl—she was still only a child at the time; but it had hastened her mental development far more than a year of ordinary life. To her amazement she had found herself listening to Hubert's whispered apologies and love-makings with only half her mind. The other half was disconcertingly cold and logical.

"This is insulting," it said. "You may be his; in a way, since you're his wife, you are. But an outlook on life that forbids you to dance with someone else, and gets furious if you do, is mediæval."

As time went on it got no better. The slightest sign of interest in another man was sufficient to precipitate either a furious scene or sullenness, until Hilda for very peace' sake confined her male

acquaintanceship to the old vicar of seventy-two and the doctor, who was three years younger. And the absurd thing about it all was that there had never been the tiniest particle of justification for her husband's attitude ; never, that is, until——

Again she asked herself the question—Why had he asked Jack Denver to stay ? He was talking now to his guest in that charming, well-bred manner of his that had captivated so many people—talking well and interestingly, as a glance at Jack's face revealed, though she hadn't heard a word that had been said for the last ten minutes. It was incredible, impossible, that Hubert could know ; after all, what was there to know ? Six months ago, on one of her rare visits to London, she had stayed the night with an old school friend—Joan Prettyman. Mr. Prettyman, Joan's father, had tactfully gone up to Manchester on business, and Joan had greeted her with a shout of joy.

" My dear," she cried, " in you lies salvation ! Cecil Turnbury, who dances like an angel, rang me up this morning to dine and wine, do a show, trek on to Ciro's, and come home with the milk from a night club. I know it will come to the old man's ears if I go alone with Cecil ; you must come, too. I'll ring up Cecil now, and tell him to rope in a cheery soul for you."

For a moment or two she had feebly protested ; she couldn't dance—her husband—she must get back.

"Tripe!" remarked Joan, elegantly, and forthwith rang up Cecil. And he had arrived at seven-thirty with Jack Denver. From the outset of the evening it was quite clear what was going to happen. Joan, having taken the possible wind out of father's sails, devoted herself exclusively to Cecil, leaving Jack Denver and Hilda to carry on their share of the good work. And Hilda, starved, though she hardly realised it, for the companionship of men of her own age, had the night of her life. There are nights which stand out like milestones in every life, and almost always are they impromptu. And there had been singularly few for Hilda Garling. But in those eight hours she realised fully for the first time all that she had missed in marrying Hubert.

Jack Denver was thirty and in the Army. Moreover, he was a man's man all through. London saw him but rarely, except when he was playing polo at Ranelagh or Hurlingham; he found that London life interfered with his eye. But in addition to being mad on every form of sport he was—without being clever—exceedingly intelligent. He was interested in politics and life generally; he read with discrimination. He could talk amusingly, and, most precious of all gifts, listen sympathetically. And that night, having gone merely to please Cecil and swearing he must be in bed by one, he found himself wishing at half-past three

that it could go on for another four hours. From the time they arrived at Ciro's, it had been merely two duets.

From Ciro's they had driven to the night club in two taxis—Joan, being quite without shame, had insisted on that. And during the drive Jack Denver tried to take stock of matters. That Hilda was married he knew; that her husband was a bit of a rum 'un he knew also from Joan. But there was another thing also which he knew, and that was that never in the course of his life had he been so powerfully attracted by any woman before.

Small wonder. Hilda—enjoying herself to the hilt—looked utterly lovely. But it wasn't only a question of looks; she was so startlingly alive. The stagnation of months had boiled over in an immense reaction. And if there was one thing which Jack Denver worshipped, it was vitality.

They left the night club at half-past three, and once more two taxis were requisitioned.

"Have you enjoyed yourself?" he asked quietly as they drove off.

"It's been heaven!" she answered.

Which, taken as a conversational effort, would not have won a prize. But when the atmosphere is electrical, it doesn't much matter what is said.

"Mrs. Garling," he went on, gravely, "when may I see you again?"

By the light of a passing lamp she saw his eyes fixed on her, and her own did not falter.

"I don't think we'd better meet again," she said, steadily. "My husband has rather peculiar ideas on the subject."

"That, of course, is quite unthinkable," he remarked. "I have never enjoyed such a wonderful evening before."

"Nor more have I," she said, staring out of the window.

She felt his hand close over hers, and for a while she made no effort to remove it. Then with a little shiver she almost snatched her hand away.

"Captain Denver," she said, "this is folly. I must tell you that my husband is almost crazily jealous of me. If he were to know that you and I were driving home at this hour of the night in a taxi alone, I think he'd probably try to—try to kill me. It sounds incredible, but it's the truth. He becomes like a madman if I even speak to another man; in fact, there have been times when I really believe he has been out of his senses."

"But it's preposterous," he said, angrily. "He can't keep you shut up like a prisoner."

"He would if he could," she answered.

"A truce to this fooling, Hilda," said Denver, urgently. "We're nearly at your house. I must see you again; I *must*. It may be folly, or it may not. I know I only met you eight hours ago—what's that matter? Time has no meaning on some occasions. I'm being crude, too; I know that, but the circumstances make it imperative.

May I motor over from Aldershot and call on you ? "

The taxi was already slowing up.

" It's madness," she whispered, " absolute madness."

" Then I'm going to be mad," he remarked quietly, as the car stopped.

The other taxi was just behind them, and for a moment or two they all stood talking on the pavement. Then, with a prodigious yawn, Joan voted for bed, and the two girls went indoors.

" A gladsome night," she said, sleepily. " And it strikes me, Hilda, my dear, that for a little sheltered country rose you're a pretty high-class performer. He's a pet, that man Denver; in fact, I'd have changed over half-way through if I hadn't known there wasn't a look-in for little Joan. Did he kiss you in the bus coming home ? "

" Joan—how can you ask such a thing ? " cried Hilda, blushing furiously.

" Cut it out, my angel—cut it out. If he didn't he's a mutt—and so are you. Heigh-ho ! bed for this child."

True to his word, Jack Denver drove his car over from Aldershot to the Pines three days later. He stayed to tea and talked more to Hubert than to her. And after tea he suggested a spin to Hindhead and the Devil's Punchbowl.

" I'm afraid an open car is one of the things I'm forbidden," said Hubert.

"Then what about you, Mrs. Garling?" asked Jack.

"My wife doesn't care about motoring," said her husband harshly.

A truly impossible fellow, reflected Jack, as he drove back to barracks. Charming in other respects—but on the subject of his wife impossible. And deep down inside a warning voice began to make itself heard—a voice that counselled caution. With a husband like that the most ordinary every-day politeness would be misconstrued. And Jack Denver was quite sufficiently honest with himself to realise that, if he saw much of Hilda Garling, he would have considerable difficulty in keeping things on the plane of conventional courtesy. In fact, as he dressed for mess that night he apostrophised his reflection in the glass in no uncertain manner.

"You're nine-tenths of the way towards falling in love with another man's wife. And that's a complication at the best of times. But, with a husband like that, it's the devil. So take a pull at yourself, young feller; take a pull."

And a pull he did take—for quite a fortnight. Then, as luck would have it, duty took him to Portsmouth. He couldn't get back to Aldershot the same night, and the following morning he started back in his car. And as he got near the Pines his pace grew slower and slower. Finally, he stopped and lit a cigarette.

"Don't be a fool," said one voice. "Go on; there's polo at the club this afternoon."

"You've played polo every day for the last week," said another voice. "The man can't eat you if you ask for lunch. Don't be a coward."

And since it's better to be called a fool than a coward, the second voice won. Jack Denver went to the Pines for the second time. And when he left at about five o'clock the nine-tenths had changed to nineteen-twentieths.

Of course, the thing was a foregone conclusion. He got into the habit of going about once a week, and one day it all came out with a rush—like a stream that had been temporarily dammed.

They were in the garden—the two of them, and something seemed suddenly to snap.

"Come away with me, my darling," he muttered. "This man is an impossible husband for you. I've got plenty of money, and I'm chucking the service, anyhow."

He tried to take her in his arms, but she drew back.

"Don't, dear, don't," she said, a little breathlessly. "It's impossible."

"Why is it impossible?" he demanded. "You love me, Hilda—I know that. And I worship the very ground you walk on. Why is it impossible?"

"Because it would kill Hubert," she answered, steadily. "I've never told you before, Jack, but

I must now. You merely thought he was delicate. It's his heart; and any sudden shock would kill him. And we couldn't do that, Jack, could we?"

"And if it wasn't for that?" he asked, dully.

She took a deep breath.

"If it wasn't for that, my man," she whispered, "I'd go to the end of the world with you to-morrow."

And, being a white man, Jack Denver merely raised her fingers to his lips and left her. It was final; it was unalterable, and it was not for him to make it harder. She heard his car drive away, and she gave a little sobbing cry. Then very steadily she walked into the house.

From that day to this she hadn't seen Jack; that had been all. All, that is, except one thing—the one thing which would have supplied the answer to her oft-repeated question. A minute after she had walked into the house a man stepped out of some bushes close to where she had been standing. At first glance it would have been hard to recognise who it was; his face was so distorted with devilish fury that he looked like a fiend. For a while he stood there, his fists tight clenched. Then he suddenly swayed, and instinctively one hand went to his heart. The fury was replaced by agony—which in its turn gave way to relief. And shortly after Hubert Garling, outwardly calm, followed his wife indoors.

That had been three months ago. And three days

ago he had done the amazingly unexpected thing.

They were having lunch, and he suddenly asked her about Jack.

"What's become of that nice fellow Denver?" he remarked. "We never seem to see him now."

"I don't know," she answered, calmly, though she felt that all the colour had left her face. "Perhaps he's on leave or manœuvres or something."

"Why don't you write and ask him to come over?" continued her husband. "Ask him over for the week-end."

"I'll write, certainly," she said, and wondered whether he could hear the pounding of her heart.

"The workmen are away from the tower, you know," he went on; "and he seemed an amusing chap."

"I'll write after lunch," she said, quietly.

And thus it came about that Jack Denver received the following morning a letter in a writing that made his hand shake uncontrollably as he opened the envelope.

"*My man,*" it ran,—

"*Hubert, for some astounding reason, is anxious for you to come and stay. As for me—I think I shall go mad if I don't see you again soon. If you think it unwise, plead duty as an excuse. But I think you'll have to come soon, or else the sudden cessation of your visits here will make H. suspicious. Come for the week-end.* H.G."

He stared at his untasted breakfast; then he shrugged his shoulders. So be it. And his answer was duly delivered at the Pines.

"*Dear Mrs. Garling,—*

"*How charming of you! I fear you must have thought I was dead, but we do work—sometimes! I'll come in time for lunch on Saturday if I may.*

"*Yours sincerely,*
"JACK DENVER."

And now dinner was over, and she was still as far as ever from getting the answer to her question, Why had Hubert done it? All through the afternoon he had been uniformly charming; he couldn't suspect anything; he couldn't. He was talking now about the tower—a strange architectural freak which stuck up from one corner of the house like a funnel on a locomotive.

"It's an old house," he was saying in his cultured, rather gentle voice. "And I can't quite make out who erected that tower originally. It was put up after the house itself was built, but for what purpose is a little obscure. It certainly can't have been entirely erected as a tomb."

"A tomb!" echoed Denver in surprise. "In what way a tomb."

"Has my wife never told you the story?" said Garling. "It's one of the stock things about

this place. I can just remember when my father made the discovery. The tower, of course, is hollow, and it had been used as a sort of box-room. There were some rough steps going spirally round it which finished abruptly in the brick roof. And one day it struck my father that it was somewhat peculiar to make steps right up to a ceiling, and he took some measurements. And he found that there was a space of about ten feet to be accounted for at the top of the tower. You can understand, of course, that it was very rare indeed that anyone went there, or such an obvious thing would have been discovered before. So he got in some workmen and proceeded to remove the bricks from the roof. And the mystery was solved. The steps which apparently disappeared into the ceiling were now found to communicate with a room. And in that room the remnants of two skeletons were found. They had been there for at least a hundred years, but there was enough to prove that one had been a man and the other a woman."

"How very interesting!" said Denver. "Did your father ever find out what had happened?"

"Not absolutely for certain," answered his host. "But I have no doubt in my own mind that it was the truth. Apparently this house, at the time when the man and woman died, belonged to a man called Shaw. And Mrs. Shaw was a very lovely lady—a fact which other men beside Mr. Shaw appreciated. Moreover, it appeared that Mrs.

Shaw was not insensible to the admiration of those other men—especially to that of a young Lord Greyton. Possibly she was flattered by the attentions of a member of the aristocracy, since her husband, though an eminently worthy man, was distinctly middle-class. At any rate, she and Lord Greyton disappeared, and were never heard of again. Mr. Shaw gave out that his wife had eloped with him, and forbade her name ever to be mentioned in his presence again. But I think there can be little doubt that somehow or other he trapped them both into the room at the top of the tower, and then proceeded to brick them in. The details, of course, will never be known. Presumably he must have drugged them first, leaving them to regain consciousness in the black darkness—because there were no windows of any sort in the tower. One thing is certain; they were not dead when they were put there. The marks are plainly visible where they had endeavoured to scratch away the brickwork with their fingers."

"What an extraordinarily gruesome story!" said Denver. "Why, Mrs. Garling—you've gone quite pale."

"I think it's a horrible story," she said, in a ow voice.

"Horrible—and yet full of poetic justice," remarked her husband, sipping his port.

"And what do you use the tower for now?" asked Denver.

"My father, who was a keen astronomer, had it made into a small observatory. I've left it much as it was, except that I've removed the telescope and carried out a few small improvements. In fact the workmen have only just finished. My father, for instance, had a sliding roof; I've had that removed. There is now merely a small dome with thick glass at the top, through which one can get a really wonderful view of the heavens."

He glanced at Denver's glass.

"Some more port? No. Well—would you care to come and see the actual room itself? And I particularly want you, my dear, to see it by artificial light." He turned to his wife. "I think you'll agree that it's an immense improvement. In fact, I'm seriously thinking of using it in future as my study. It's small, of course—in fact, tiny. But it's so far removed from any noise or disturbance. And I find, Denver, that I can concentrate better in a confined space."

He was leading the way along an upstair corridor as he talked.

"I am a bit of a recluse, and I write a little. Dull, scientific stuff. And I really believe that in this room I have got my ideal working room."

He had reached the top of the stairs in the tower and opened the door.

"Quaint, isn't it? Those Chinese hangings round the walls give it a cosy effect. And then this

door—sound-proof. I cannot hear any noise when I'm at work."

They were standing in the centre of the room, and Jack Denver looked round with frank curiosity. It certainly was quaint. Above their heads, through the glass dome, he could see the sky glittering with stars—a magnificent view, as his host had said. A thick pile carpet covered the floor, and the only pieces of furniture were a heavy desk that filled half the room and a big chair. The electric light was concealed just where the dome commenced, and threw its direct rays upwards, giving a pleasant diffused light all over the room. And the walls—hexagonal in shape—were completely covered with rich yellow Oriental silk panels. A bizarre room—almost an uncanny room ; yet with a strange element of fascination about it.

" There was one thing I omitted to mention at dinner in my little story," said Hubert Garling. " From what small study I have made of the matter, there can be no doubt that Mrs. Shaw and Lord Greyton died of suffocation. In fact, I once made a calculation that the supply of air would have lasted them about twelve hours. This room is half the original size."

" Poor brutes ! " remarked Denver.

" Moreover," continued his host, " the fact that Mr. Shaw was unable to watch their death struggle must have robbed his revenge of much of its charm."

For a moment they saw his face—distorted,

fiendish ; then the door shut, and they were alone. Half stupefied they stared at one another ; the whole thing was so sudden, so utterly unexpected. And it was the girl who recovered herself first and spoke.

" He knew, Jack," she whispered. " He's known all along. That's why he made me ask you here."

Denver swore softly under his breath ; as yet he had not realised the danger.

" Damn him ! " he said, angrily. " This is beyond a joke. We've done absolutely nothing of which we need be ashamed. Why, I've never even kissed you, Hilda." He went to the door and tugged at it ; it refused to budge.

" Well, this settles it, my dear," he went on. " He may have a weak heart or he may not—but I don't stand for this form of humour. I shall tell your husband exactly what I think of him, and that you're going to come away with me. And he can take what steps he damn well chooses."

He lit a cigarette and began pacing up and down the little room with short, angry steps, while the girl, leaning against the desk, watched him with a strange look in her eyes.

" Jack, dear," she said at length, " I don't think you quite understand. This isn't a joke."

He stopped short in his tracks and stared at her.

" What do you mean ? " he asked, in a low voice.

" This is dead earnest. He means to murder us."

The colour slowly left his face.

"Murder us?" he stammered, foolishly.

"That's why he told you that story at dinner to-night. That's why he's had men working on this tower, and didn't suggest that you should come over till they'd finished. That's why he's locked us in here."

"But, good God! Hilda, the man must be mad," he said, hoarsely.

"On the subject of me he is," she answered.

And still it seemed as if he could hardly realise.

"But someone must come," he cried, angrily. "He can't keep us shut in here for days."

She went across to him.

"Didn't you hear what he said as he went out? Suffocation. It took twelve hours for those two, and this is half the size. Six hours, Jack—six hours. And the servants are on the other side of the house."

And now at last he understood, and with the understanding he became himself again. He smiled thoughtfully, and pressed out his cigarette.

"Under those circumstances—no smoking. And under those circumstances also—no scruples either."

He caught the girl in his arms and kissed her again and again, while she clung to him half sobbing. Then, still with the same thoughtful smile, he pushed her gently into the chair.

"I must explore," he said, briefly.

First of all—the door. Coolly he examined it,

while the girl watched him with eager eyes. He seemed so calm and assured—so completely confident in himself. A minute or two later he turned and looked at her.

"Nothing doing there," he said cheerfully. "It fits as tight as a safe door, and there isn't even a keyhole on this side. It must have some patent form of lock."

He went round the walls quietly and systematically, tearing down the silk panels as he got to them. Nothing but smooth cement—not a crack, not a fissure.

He stood on the desk to examine the roof. It was of flawless glass, immensely thick. And then he had to get down abruptly. He put his hand to his forehead; it was wet with perspiration.

And now the full gravity of the situation had come home to him. Mad, Hubert Garling might be; there was no sign of madness about this trap. It was diabolically efficient. It was small consolation to know that the murderer might be hanged; all that mattered was that he and the girl he loved were in an air-tight room, and that in a few hours that air would be exhausted.

He took off his shoe and hurled it with all his force at the glass above his head. For ten minutes he went on throwing it; then with a little gesture of despair he threw the shoe on the floor. The glass was too thick; he was exhausting himself and using up precious oxygen uselessly.

"Supposing we shouted, Jack," said the girl, quietly.

For a quarter of an hour they shouted "Help!" at intervals of half a minute. No one came; nothing happened.

"It's getting terribly stuffy, Jack," she whispered.

"Yes, darling; I'm afraid it is," he answered, steadily.

He was sitting on the arm of her chair—thinking desperately. Was there no way out? Was there nothing to be done?

"He can't mean to kill us like this," she cried, in despair.

He bent and kissed her gently, and she clung to him like a frightened child.

And so they sat for twenty minutes or more, till suddenly the girl clutched his arm.

"Jack," she whispered, "look up. Oh, my God, look at him!"

She cowered back in the chair, and the man beside her, strong-nerved though he was, shuddered uncontrollably. For staring down on them from above, with his face pressed against the glass, was Hubert Garling. He was crawling over the smooth surface like some loathsome insect—gloating as he watched them.

Moved by an uncontrollable impulse, Jack Denver seized his discarded shoe and hurled it at the madman. So straight was the aim that they

could see him start back ; then, as the shoe dropped harmlessly back to the floor, Garling's face once more pressed against the glass. And he was shaking with maniacal laughter.

" Turn off the light, dear," sobbed the girl. " I can't bear it."

There was a click and the tower was in darkness.

" Hold me in your arms, darling," she cried, pitifully. " I'm not frightened when you've got me close."

Jack Denver took her in his arms almost mechanically : into his mind had come an idea. Above them, outlined against the sky, they could see Garling, and it seemed as if he was beating furiously against the glass with his fists, enraged at being baulked of his triumph.

" Listen, sweetheart," said Jack, urgently. " There's a chance. Just a chance. If he thinks we're dead it's possible he might come in and open the door. I want you to sprawl forward on the floor—face downwards. Don't move. Just lie there. Then I'll switch on the light, stagger round the room once or twice, and then fall myself. Act, my beloved, act as you have never acted before."

" I understand, dear," she answered, steadily. " Just kiss me once more." He strained her to him ; then she lay down on the floor half hidden by the desk.

"Ready, Hilda?"

"Yes, Jack; I'm ready."

Once more the light went on, and Jack Denver stared upwards. Act—oh, God!—let him act sufficiently to deceive the madman. He plucked at his collar, and staggered wildly back against the desk; then he raised imploring hands to Garling. His breath came in short gasps; he went to the door and beat on it. Then again he raised his hands towards the gibbering, gloating face, transformed now with a sort of diabolical ecstasy into something utterly fiendish.

Then he pitched forward on his face—turned over, and lay staring through half-closed eyes at the man above. Had they bluffed him? Garling's face was still pressed against the glass; his eyes roamed from one to the other of his victims.

A quarter of an hour—eternity—went by, and he was still there. And then quite suddenly he was gone; the stars shone through the dome clear and unimpeded. For five minutes Jack Denver remained motionless; then, still lying in the same position, he spoke in a whisper.

"He's gone, darling; but don't move yet. If he comes in, I'll go for him, but whatever happens you get on the other side of the door."

"All right, Jack; but pray Heaven he comes soon. I don't think I can go on much longer."

Again eternity passed: the door was still shut.

He wasn't coming; the acting had been in vain. Hubert Garling had seen, as he thought, their agony before they became unconscious; now he was going to make quite certain they were dead before he bothered with them further.

And with a dreadful feeling of physical sickness Jack Denver realised that, though the acting had been in vain, it had been a wonderful dress-rehearsal. Even so, in reality, would Hilda pitch forward and lie still; even so would he tear at his collar and fight for the air which was not there.

The girl had risen, and he rose too, and went to her.

"He's not coming, Jack," she said, steadily. "We've failed."

"Yes, dear—I'm afraid we've failed."

"So this is the end."

He made no answer; only put his arm round her waist and held her tightly.

"I'm not frightened, my man," she went on, quietly. "I expect I'll go first, but you'll find me waiting for you over the other side of the valley."

He cried aloud in his agony of mind; already he felt as if an iron band was pressing round his head.

"Oh, God!—if I could only get a message through somehow."

And even as his prayer went up, his eyes rested on the electric light switch. He'd seen it fifty times before; he'd used it in that last despairing throw for safety; and now—he stared at it as if

he'd seen it for the first time. Fool that he was—idiot, not to have thought of it before. The tower could be seen from the road, even if he couldn't be heard from there. And it was the only chance. He turned off the light; then he began to signal.

Three short bursts of light; three long ones; three short again. S.O.S. Then HELP in Morse. Again and again S.O.S. HELP. S.O.S. HELP.

And the iron band round his head grew tighter and tighter. How long he went on he had no idea; time was measured only by the click of the switch—on and off. Dimly he realised that the girl had got to her feet, and with a dreadful look in her face was staggering towards him. He felt her clutch hold of his arm; from a great distance he heard her voice:—

"Jack—I can't breathe; I can't——"

Her grip relaxed, and she collapsed on the floor at his feet, struggling horribly to breathe.

S.O.S. HELP. S.O.S. HELP.

Slower and slower the message flashed out into the night, until, at last, it ceased altogether. And Jack Denver's knees gave from under him. With one last effort he turned off the light; then he crumpled up on the floor beside the woman he loved.

And so they found them—two naval officers, one of whom, by the mercy of Allah, was a doctor.

"My God!" he gasped, as they flung open the door and the atmosphere inside hit them. "Get 'em into the fresh air, Flags; and for Heaven's sake—hurry."

"Are they dead, Doc.?" cried his companion, as they laid the two unconscious bodies by an open window.

"No—but damned near it." He looked thoughtfully at his brother-officer. "Go down and see what's happened to that madman below, old boy. I'll look after these two."

The Flag-Lieutenant went, to return in a few moments with a face that was strangely white.

"Doc.," he muttered, "he's dead. Half-way along the passage there."

The doctor got up quickly and followed him. And for a while he stood looking at Hubert Garling's face, that stared with unseeing eyes at the ceiling.

"Heart, Flags, or I'm a Dutchman," he said. "The struggle to get the key did for him."

They covered the distorted features with a pocket-handkerchief, and went back to the living. And it was a couple of minutes before either of them spoke again.

"May Heaven be praised, old man," said the doctor, "that we decided to motor back to Portsmouth and not stop in town. It strikes me there have been some funny things happening here to-night."

"Where the devil are the servants, anyway?" demanded his pal.

"We'll get them shortly," said the other. "And the police, too. Don't forget, we killed that bloke between us. It was the only thing to do; he was crazy. But it's a police matter."

"What is?" Jack Denver's hoarse croak made them both swing round. He was sitting up, swaying a little, and the doctor hurried to him.

"Feeling better?" he said. "That's good."

Denver pushed him away.

"How's Hilda—how's Mrs. Garling?"

"Going fine. She hasn't come round yet—but she will soon. There she is, beside you."

For a moment Denver looked at her, then he got up unsteadily.

"I don't know who you are," he said, "but there's a man in this house I'm going to kill."

The two naval officers looked at one another.

"Steady, old chap," said the Flag-Lieutenant. He followed Denver along the passage. "Unless I'm much mistaken, he's dead already."

They paused by the body, and he lifted the pocket-handkerchief from the dead man's face.

"Is that the man?"

"It is," said Denver. "How did it happen?"

"It doesn't take long to tell," answered the other. "We were motoring back from town, and suddenly we saw your signals. At first we paid

no attention, and then—being a Flag-Lieutenant myself—I took them in automatically. S.O.S. Help. We rushed into the house and found that man in the hall downstairs. He was crazy—or so it seemed to us. Told us you were dead by now: and if you weren't you were going to die. Brandished a key in front of our faces, and roared with laughter. We were on him like a knife, and, I can tell you, he put up a fight. But we got the key, and we got to you in time."

"She's coming-to," said the doctor's voice from just behind them.

For a moment Jack Denver stared at them both.

"I won't try and thank you now," he said, quietly. "I'll do that and explain everything shortly. But when you've been into the valley of the shadow with someone, and come out first, it's good to welcome your fellow-voyager."

He turned and went back to Hilda Garling. And when, a few seconds later, she opened her eyes, it was into his that they stared. His arms were round her, and he was smiling.

"Jack," she whispered, exultingly, "it wasn't so terrible, was it? And we're together after all."

For a moment he didn't understand: then it came to him.

"Dear heart," he said, tenderly. "We're not dead: we're alive."

I

"Uncle James should be here soon," said Molly thoughtfully from the other end of the tea-table. "For Heaven's sake be nice to him, Peter."

"When have I ever not been nice to Uncle James?" I demanded. "But I tell you candidly, Molly, that it can't last much longer. He's only fifty-five: he will almost certainly live another forty years. And I can't stand another forty years of Uncle James."

"I'm sure he'll leave us all his money, old boy," she said pleadingly.

"I can't help that," I retorted firmly—at least as firmly as I ever can retort to Molly. "A man can buy money at too great a price. And if he brings another of his abominable inventions with him this time, I shall tell him what I think. He ought to know better at his age."

"I know, Peter," she answered gently. "But it's only for the week-end. . . ."

"Only!" I echoed bitterly. "Thank God for it."

"I must say I do hope he hasn't invented anything else for saving work in the house," she

conceded. "Servants are so difficult in these days, and the parlour-maid seems to be settling down at last."

"He should confine his atrocities to his own home," I said. "A man who tries to emulate Heath Robinson in real life ought to be locked up."

Molly sighed. "I know, darling," she murmured. "But think of the money."

And they say that women are idealists. . . .

"Take that last week-end he spent here," I began wrathfully, and then Molly stopped me.

"Don't, dear, don't," she begged. "And that reminds me, they've never sent up yet to repair the kitchen ceiling."

Mind you, if the diabolical contrivances conceived in Uncle James's perverted mind were harmless little things like patent match-boxes or unbreakable sock-suspenders, I wouldn't mind. He is an excellent judge of wine, and has an excellent cellar—two assets which enable one to slur over small idiosyncrasies in their possessor. But—well, take that last week-end.

I feared the worst when he arrived: he was so infernally pleased with himself. He came on Friday, and on Saturday I had to go up to Town, so my knowledge of what happened is only second-hand. I was met at the station by Molly—a rather wild-eyed Molly—who poured out the whole hideous story on the way up to the house. Uncle James had waited till I was well away before he

sprang it on her—and even she had tried to be firm when she heard what it was.

"It was a patent labour-saving device for me in the kitchen, Peter," she exclaimed weakly. "Little pulleys and things—and bits of string. I explained everything to Martha—told her he was eccentric, and that we could take it down the instant he went—and she seemed to understand."

She faltered a little and my heart sank.

"It took him two hours to put it up with step-ladders, while Martha sat sardonically in a corner. Then he explained to us how it worked. Oh! it was awful."

I took her arm: she was rapidly becoming hysterical.

"Of course, something went wrong. Uncle James says it was the hook coming out of the ceiling—I know the plaster is all over the floor. But whatever it was, the big saucepan of potatoes shot into the corner—Martha's corner—and she couldn't get out of the way in time."

Molly gulped. "She got up with potatoes all over her, and threw them one by one at Uncle James."

"Did she hit him?" I asked eagerly.

"Twice," answered Molly. "Then she left the house."

Well, now that was the last time he stayed with us. Do you wonder that at times I felt I couldn't stand it much longer? Of course, Molly's account

of it was a trifle incoherent—possibly even a trifle exaggerated. But the one salient fact remains that his last visit cost us Martha.

A series of loud explosions outside the door recalled me from the bitter past, and Molly got up, looking alarmed.

"Good gracious, what's that?" she cried.

"Probably he has invented a motor-car," I answered grimly, "which goes sideways with the passengers underneath."

"Do you think it's Uncle James?" she asked uneasily, and at that moment the front door bell rang.

It was Uncle James right enough, and we went out into the hall to greet him.

"Ah! my dear children," he cried as he saw us, "I've arrived."

"Anything wrong with the car?" asked Molly as she kissed him.

"Not going very well," he answered, shaking hands with me. "And now it's stopped altogether. I wish you'd just give me a hand, Peter."

"Certainly." I'm afraid my smile was a trifle strained. With an ordinary car I can compete: not with Uncle James's. "What's the trouble?"

"Well—I'll just show you the idea," he said cheerfully as he led the way. "I've got a few notions of my own incorporated into the general design—little gadgets, you know. Now, first of all"—he gazed pensively at the dashboard—

" we'll try that a little farther open. And, Peter—if you just pull that wire by the steering pillar she ought to start."

I pulled the wire, and Uncle James tackled the starting handle. There was an alarming report, and a cloud of white smoke which seemed to please him.

" Ah! spark's all right, anyway," he murmured. " Once more."

This time she back-fired so violently that only the greatest agility on his part saved him from a broken wrist. In view of what was to come, I found myself wishing later that he hadn't been quite so agile.

" Pull harder, Peter," he cried, returning to the assault.

I did: I pulled the whole wire out, and the car promptly started.

" I knew she'd go," he announced complacently. " Just a little patience wanted."

I preserved a discreet silence as we went round to the garage: there are moments when speech is both unwise and tactless. And it was not until we were strolling back to the house, my sin still undiscovered, that I breathed again.

" You must let me run you up to the club-house in mine to-morrow morning, Uncle James," I said lightly. " Course in splendid condition."

" Aren't you going to London to-morrow? " he demanded.

"No. I'm taking a holiday in honour of your visit."

I forebore to tell him that Molly had threatened divorce unless I did.

"What sort of time will suit you?" I went on. "Then I can ring up and let them know about caddies."

Uncle James did not immediately reply, and I noticed he looked a little thoughtful.

"To tell you the truth, Peter," he began slowly, "I wasn't particularly anxious to play golf with you to-morrow morning. The fact is, I wanted"—he hesitated for a moment—"I wanted to practise a bit before I played you again."

"Well—we won't play a serious round, Uncle James," I said mildly. "We might get up there and knock about a bit: have some lunch, don't you know—and play in the afternoon."

Anything to keep him out of the house; those were Molly's instructions.

"Yes," he agreed. "We might do that. And in the afternoon I shall beat you."

"Why, of course. Beat my head off."

"I have cured my slice, Peter," he announced.

"Good," I cried. "You'd have beaten me last time but for that."

"No—not last time. But I shall this."

There was an air of such complete conviction about his tone that I glanced at him in mild surprise. Uncle James may be and is an excellent

judge of wine ; Uncle James may be and is a public pest with his inventions ; but Uncle James cannot be and is not and never will be a golfer. He is not like anything on this earth that I have ever seen when he gets a golf club in his hands. He is, and I say it advisedly with due regard to the solemnity of making such a claim for any man, the worst golfer in the world.

"I have—er—turned what little ingenuity I possess, Peter, upon a lengthy and scientific consideration of the game of golf." He spoke as a man does who weighs his words with care, and involuntarily we both paused. "I have read many books on the game—by Vardon and Taylor and others—men doubtless well qualified to write on the subject."

I bowed silently : speech was beyond me.

"And it seems to me," he went on, "that they evade the real issue. For instance now, they unite in saying that the essence of golf lies in the swing. But how am I to know that my swing is like theirs ?"

"How indeed ?" I murmured chokingly.

"Again they reiterate the statement, 'slow back.' But ideas of slowness differ."

"True," I agreed—"very true."

To see Uncle James take his club back reminds one of a man lunging furiously at a wasp.

"Two points of many, you perceive, Peter," he continued, "on which I came to the conclusion that a little ingenuity might be of great assistance.

And so, I have—er—perfected, or am in the process of perfecting, a small device, by which the—er—comparative novice like myself can obtain mechanical assistance in carrying out these maxims."

Thank God! Molly joined us at that moment: I was beginning to turn pale. Uncle James encased in pullies on a Saturday morning on the links was a prospect that made me feel faint. Better a thousand times that the entire domestic staff should resign.

"Is it a very complicated device, Uncle James?" I asked feebly, and I heard Molly catch her breath.

"It takes a little adjustment," he answered. "And I shall require Molly's assistance."

"Uncle James has invented something," I explained, studiously avoiding her eye, "which he thinks will improve his golf."

"What sort of thing?" inquired Molly.

"It's not so much an original invention," he explained, "as a common-sense application of a well-known principle—the principle of elasticity."

I suppose I looked mystified—I certainly felt it—and he beamed at us contentedly. Then he fumbled in his pocket and produced a small parcel.

"It is my firm belief," he continued, as he undid the string, "that with this I shall be able to reduce my handicap to single figures, or even"—he paused for a moment, and his voice shook a little at the thought—"or even to scratch."

At first sight the invention looked like a cross between a young octopus and the tram-lines at the Elephant and Castle. On closer inspection it looked like a nightmare. Streamers of india-rubber flowed in all directions from metal rings, terminating in little clips and loops. Some were short and some were long; some were thick and some were thin—and to each was affixed a label.

"There it is, you see," he remarked proudly, "neat and simple. Merely following first principles, Peter."

"But," I stammered, "how does it work, Uncle James?"

"You must surely follow the main idea," he exclaimed, with the genial toleration of the great brain. "Each of these lengths of rubber fulfils a purpose of its own, and the thickness and length have been calculated to enable them to fulfil that purpose scientifically. For instance—this one."

He indicated a short, stocky little fellow, with a loop at the end.

"Now, Duncan lays great stress on the action of the right elbow during the upward swing. He insists that it should be kept close to the body. By the simple process of attaching this loop round the right elbow—the result is obtained."

"I'm afraid I'm still rather dense," I said dazedly.

"The ring—this metal ring," he explained a little wearily, "is attached to the inside of my coat.

From it the rubber goes to my right elbow. These others go elsewhere. Similarly with the remaining rings. Each is securely fastened inside my coat, and from them the rubber cords go to their respective places where they are secured."

"What is the long, thin one, Uncle James?" asked Molly wildly.

"That one?" He examined the label. "To left wrist for follow through. You see it fulfils a dual purpose. It restrains one in the upward swing—and assists one in the downward."

And then, thank heavens! the dressing-bell rang, and we went indoors. My brain was reeling: it was incredible to think that any man could have such a mind. And what made it worse was that Molly seemed to be in a splendid temper. I even heard her congratulate her abominable relative on his cleverness.

"Could anything be better, old boy?" she said, coming into my dressing-room. "He'll be perfectly happy on the links, with you and his india-rubber." She choked slightly.

"Understand me, Molly," I answered coldly. "I go to London to-morrow, and I do not return till Uncle James has left. I shall have a telephone message in the morning. I utterly and absolutely refuse to take your confounded relative up to the links on a Saturday morning, swathed from head to foot in rubber bands."

"But, Peter darling," she began soothingly.

"Go away," I said firmly—"go away. I hate your family."

"But, Peter darling," she continued, "he won't do any harm. He can't play any worse with it on than he does with it off."

"That," I agreed, "is an indubitable fact. But—why, confound it, Molly—it's against the rules. It must be against the rules. It's absolutely immoral."

"I know, dearest," she answered. "But no one will find out—and it keeps him happy. After all, it's better than letting him loose in the house. . . ."

Of course, I gave in finally; I knew I should, I always do with Molly. And after all she was quite right. The infernal machine would be hidden underneath his coat, and no one need know. And he *has* got a lot of money.

II

We got off about ten on Saturday morning—Uncle James and I. Molly had sewn the rings into his coat after dinner the night before under his expert eye; she had then superintended the connecting up in the morning after breakfast. And that completed her share of the performance. She flatly refused to accompany us to the links, on the plea of household duties. She equally flatly refused to speak to me alone, or even to meet my eye. So I placed Uncle James's bag of nineteen clubs in the car and we started.

It was a beautiful day for golf—soft, balmy, and

without a breath of wind. Moreover, Uncle James was in a splendid temper.

"I shall do a good round this afternoon, Peter," he affirmed confidently. "Splendid device, this of mine. Tried one or two practise swings while you were getting the car."

"Good," I cried. With the new day had come a certain cheerful optimism, and I let the car out a bit more. "But if I was you, Uncle James, I'd lie low about it. Don't tell anyone, and you might make a bit of money to-morrow."

I could see the pride of the inventor struggling with the wonderful idea I had suggested. To actually beat somebody at golf! It opened a vista of possibility almost too marvellous for imagination.

"You see," I continued craftily, "people might belittle your game if they knew."

I left it at that, and hoped for the best. There were quite a number of men about when we arrived at the club-house, and as Uncle James wanted to try his device, I fixed up a game for the morning. Then I showed him a hole where he could practise approach shots, and left him. It was a fatal move on my part: I ought to have known better. To leave Uncle James alone on a links—especially on Saturday morning—is asking for trouble. I got it.

The first man I saw as I came in after my round was Colonel Thresher. He was talking to the secretary, who was trying to soothe him.

"I'll look into it, Colonel," he said mildly. "Leave it to me."

"But I tell you there's a madman on the links," roared the irate officer. "He's dug a hole on the seventeenth fairway big enough to bury a cow in."

My heart sank; it was the seventeenth where I had left Uncle James.

"The damned man is a menace to public safety," fumed the Colonel. "He hits the ball backwards and through his legs. And he's using the most appalling language. Here he is, sir—here he is."

I choked and turned round as Uncle James entered. I could see at a glance that he was no longer in a splendid temper. Far from it.

"The lies on this course are atrocious, Peter," he cried as soon as he saw me—"positively atrocious."

I attempted to intervene—but it was too late.

"And they won't be improved, sir," roared the Colonel, "by your exhibition of trench digging. Damn it—a man falling into some of those holes you've made would break his neck."

"Confound your impertinence, sir," began Uncle James shaking his fist in his rage. And then he paused suddenly: in mid-air, so to speak. A spasm of pain passed over his face, and a loud twanging noise came from the region of his back. The Colonel started violently, and retreated, while the secretary took two rapid paces to the rear.

"I told you he was mad," muttered the Colonel nervously. "He's got a musical box in his shirt."

It was that remark that finished it, and removed the last vestige of Uncle James's self-control. To have his latest invention alluded to as a musical box turned him temporarily into a raving lunatic. And as other members drew near in awestruck silence a torrent of words in a strange tongue poured from his lips. It turned out to be some Indian dialect, of which my relative knew a smattering. Unfortunately, so did the Colonel, and he answered in the same language. I gathered later from an onlooker, who also understood the lingo, that honours were about easy, with the betting slightly on Uncle James. He'd got in first with some of the choicer terms of endearment. And then Uncle still further lost his head. He challenged the Colonel to a game that afternoon for a tenner—a challenge which that warrior immediately accepted with a sardonic laugh.

To every one else it seemed a most happy termination of the incident: to me it was the last straw. Uncle James had no more chance of beating the Colonel than I should have of beating Abe Mitchell. Not that the Colonel was a good golfer; he wasn't. But he was one of those steady players who can be relied on to go round in two or three over sevens. Which, with Uncle as his opponent, meant a victory for the Colonel by ten and eight.

However, the challenge had been given and accepted: there was nothing for it but to hope for the best. Uncle James had disappeared to wash

his hands; the Colonel had been led away breathing hard, when I suddenly thought of Molly. After all, he was *her* relative.

"Is that you, Molly?" I said over the 'phone. "Well, the worst has occurred. Your uncle has challenged old Colonel Thresher to a game this afternoon—after the combined efforts of most of the members just prevented a free fight in the smoking-room."

I heard her choke gently. Then—"Well, that's all right, Peter."

"It isn't," I fumed. "He's got no more chance of winning than—than— Don't you understand: Thresher called his invention a musical box. It came into action as they were abusing one another, and twanged. It's an affair of honour with Uncle James. And if he loses, he'll never forgive us."

"He mustn't lose, Peter." I thought her voice was thoughtful.

"Then I wish to heaven you'd come up and prevent it," I said peevishly.

"I will," she said, and I gasped. "What ball is he using?"

"Silver Kings. Red dots. But look here, Molly, you mustn't . . . It's for a tenner. . . . Are you there?"

She wasn't: she'd rung off. And somewhat pensively I joined Uncle James at the bar. I never quite know with Molly: she is capable of doing most peculiar things.

"I'll teach him, Peter." He greeted me with a scowl. "What did he say—musical box? The infernal scoundrel."

"What was it that made the noise, Uncle James?" I asked soothingly.

"One of the longer rubbers got caught up in my braces," he said. "Incidentally it nipped a bit of my back. . . . Bah! Musical box. The villain."

"Is it acting all right?" I led him towards the dining-room.

"I shall adjust it finally after lunch," he stated.

"You don't think," I hazarded, "that as you haven't actually perfected it yet, it would perhaps be better to play without it."

"Certainly not." He glared sombrely at the back of his rival, and once again I heard him whisper: "Musical box."

Then we sat down to lunch. It was a silent meal and I was glad when it was over. Uncle James—that genial if eccentric individual—had departed: an infuriated and revengeful man had taken his place. And what would be the result on his disposition when he forked up ten Bradburys to the Colonel was beyond my mental scope. He was never at his best on the golf links: but this time . . .

He disappeared for a considerable time, after consuming two glasses of our best light port, which he stated was completely unfit for human consumption, and I wandered thoughtfully towards the first

tee. There was no sign of Molly, though I thought I saw the flutter of something red in the distance, which might have been her. And then the professional strolled up.

"Hear there's a tenner on Colonel Thresher's game," he said affably.

"There is," I answered grimly. "Did you see his opponent playing this morning?"

"I saw the gentleman doing exercises on the seventeenth," he said guardedly.

"That's my uncle, Jenkins," I cried bitterly—"or rather my wife's uncle. Can you as a man and a golfer give me the faintest shadow of hope that the match won't end on the tenth green?"

"Your uncle, is he," he returned diplomatically. "Peculiar style, sir, hasn't he?"

"Peculiar," I groaned. "He'd earn a fortune on the variety stage. By the way, you haven't seen my wife, have you?"

"Yes, sir. I thought she was playing with you. She's just bought a couple of old remakes."

"What brand, Jenkins?" I asked slowly.

"Red-dot silver kings. Seemed very keen on 'em, though she generally uses Dunlops."

I turned away lest he should see my face. I had more or less resigned myself to being cut out of Uncle James's will and to seeing his money go to a home for lost cats; but to be turned out of the club as well for Molly's nefarious scheme was a bit over the odds. What devilry she contem-

plated I did not know—I didn't even try to guess. But not for nothing had she invested in two remake red dots, and disappeared into the blue.

"Here they are," said Jenkins. "Odd sort of walk your uncle has got, sir."

Now Uncle James has many peculiarities, but I had never noticed anything strange about his pedestrianism. The shock, therefore, was all the greater. To what portion of his anatomy he had attached his infernal machine factory I was in ignorance: but the net result was fierce. He looked like a cross between a king penguin and a trussed fowl suffering from an acute attack of locomotor ataxy. A perfect bevy of members had gathered outside the club-house, and were watching him with awed fascination: his caddy, after one fearful convulsion of laughter, had relapsed into his customary after-luncheon hiccoughs. It was a dreadful spectacle—but worse, far worse, was to come.

The Colonel stalked to the tee in grim silence. His face was a little flushed: in his eyes was the light of battle.

"Ten pounds, you said, sir—I believe."

"I will make it twenty, if you prefer," said Uncle James loftily.

"Certainly," snapped the Colonel, and addressed his ball.

Usually after lunch the Colonel fails to reach the fairway of the first hole. On this occasion,

however, the ball flew quite a hundred yards down the middle of the course, and the Colonel stepped magnificently off the tee and proceeded to light a cigar.

The members drew closer as Uncle James advanced, and even the caddy forbore to hiccough. The moment was tense with emotion: it still lives in my memory and ever will.

"Slow back," had said Vardon; "follow through," had ordered Ray. Merciful heavens! they should have seen the result of their teaching. Uncle James achieved the most wonderful wind shot of modern times.

He lifted his driver like a professional weight-lifter, and at about the same velocity. Then, his face grim with determination, he let it down again. To say that he followed through would be to damn with faint praise. The club itself finished twenty yards in front of the Colonel's ball, and Uncle James fell over backwards.

"Very good," said the Colonel. "But the object of the game is to get your ball into the hole—not your club."

"Another driver, boy," said Uncle James magnificently when he was again in a vertical position, and at that moment I felt proud of being related to him. Once more Uncle James lifted his club; once more, under the combined influence of the "to left wrist for follow through" rubber and his inflexible determination, the club descended. And

this time he hit the ball. In cricket phraseology point would have got it in the neck. As it was, the Colonel's caddy sprang into the air with a scream of fear, and got it in the stomach, whence the ball rebounded into the tee box.

"Confound it, sir!" roared the Colonel. "That's my boy."

"Precisely, sir," returned Uncle James complacently. "It is therefore my hole."

For a moment I feared for Colonel Thresher's reason. Even Jenkins, a most phlegmatic man, retired rapidly behind the starter's box, and laid his head on a cold stone. In fact, only Uncle James seemed unperturbed. He unwound himself, twanged faintly, and started for the second tee.

"I must adjust my 'right elbow in' grip, Peter," he remarked as I trailed weakly behind him. "It prevents me raising my club with the freedom required for a perfect swing."

"Do you mean to say, sir"—the Colonel had at last found his voice—"that you intend to claim that hole?"

"I presume that we are playing under the rules of golf." Uncle James regarded him coldly. "And the point is legislated for. Should a player's ball strike his opponent or his opponent's caddy the player wins the hole."

"That doesn't apply to attempted murder off the tee," howled the Colonel.

"You are not in the least degree funny, sir,"

returned Uncle James still more coldly. "In fact, I find you rather insulting. If you like, and care to forfeit the stakes, we will call the match off."

"I'll be damned if I do," roared the other. "But before you drive next time, sir, I'll take precautions. I came out to play golf, not to be killed by a brass band."

Uncle James turned white, but he controlled himself admirably. Even when he reached the second tee, and the Colonel, seizing his caddy, went to ground in a pot bunker, over the edge of which they both peered fearfully, Uncle retained his dignity.

"Straight down the middle is the line, I suppose," he remarked to his caddy.

"Yus," said the caddy from a range of twenty yards.

But unfortunately Uncle James did not go straight down the middle. It's a very nice five hole is our second: a drive, a full brassie and a mashie on to the green over a little hill. But you must get your drive—otherwise . . . And Uncle was otherwise.

I measured it afterwards. His driver hit the ground exactly eighteen inches behind the ball, travelling with all the force of "to left wrist for follow through." The shaft followed through: the head did not. It remained completely embedded in the turf.

"Have you finished?" demanded the Colonel, emerging from his dugout. Then he pointed an

outraged finger at the broken head. "This is a tee, sir, not a timber-yard. Would you be good enough to remove that foreign body before I drive?"

I removed it: I was afraid Uncle would twang again if he stooped. And then the Colonel addressed his ball. From there by easy stages, with a fine-losing hazard off a tree, it travelled out of bounds.

"Stroke and distance, I presume," murmured Uncle. "Boy, another driver."

And then ensued a spectacle which almost shattered my nerves. Uncle James got stuck. He got his club up but he couldn't get it down. Both arms were wrapped round his neck, the club lay over his left shoulder pointing at the ground. And there he remained, saying the most dreadful things, and biting his sleeve.

"Posing for a statue?" asked the Colonel satirically.

"Grrr—" said Uncle, and suddenly something snapped. The club came down like a streak of lightning—there was a sweet, clear click, and even Duncan would have been satisfied with the result. Probably it was the most exquisite moment of Uncle's life. Heaven knows how it happened—certainly the performer didn't. But for the first time and—I feel tolerably confident—the last, Uncle James hit a perfect drive. It was three hundred yards if it was an inch, and the Colonel turned pale.

"That's two I've played," said Uncle calmly. "You play the odd, sir."

It was then that the fighting spirit awoke in all its intensity in his opponent, and Uncle James followed him from bunker to bunker counting audibly until they came up with his drive.

"I'm playing one off ten," he remarked genially.

"And you'll bally well play it," snapped the Colonel.

Uncle James smiled tolerantly. "Certainly. As you please. Boy, the wry-necked mashie."

But it wasn't the wry-necked mashie's day in. Whatever Duncan might have thought about Uncle's drive, I don't think he'd have passed the wry-necked mashie. At the best of times it was a fearsome weapon—on this occasion it became diabolical. Turf and mud flew in all directions—only the ball remained *in statu quo*.

"That's like as we lie," said the Colonel, as Uncle paused for breath.

"Confound you, sir—go away," roared Uncle James, completely losing all vestige of self-control. And at that moment I saw Molly peering over the hill that guarded the green.

"The laid-back niblick, boy." Uncle threw the wry-necked mashie into a neighbouring garden—and resumed the attack.

"Fourteen—fifteen—sixteen," boomed the Colonel. "Why not get a spade. . . . Ah! congratulations. You've hit the ball, even if you have

sliced it out of bounds. Perhaps you'd replace some of the turf—or shall I send for a 'ground under repair' notice."

"Your shot, sir," said Uncle thickly.

"Let me see—I'm playing one off six," remarked the Colonel. "And you're out of bounds."

"I may not be." Uncle ground his teeth. "I may have hit a tree and bounced back. G-r-r-r!"

There was a loud tearing noise, and Uncle James started as if an asp had stung him.

"Confound you, sir," howled the Colonel, as he topped his ball, "will you be silent when I'm playing?"

But Uncle James was beyond aid.

"My God, Peter!" he muttered. "I've come undone."

It was only too true: he was twanging all over like a jazz band. Portions of india-rubber were popping out of his garments like worms on a damp green, and every now and then the back of his coat was convulsed by some internal spasm.

"Can't you take it off altogether?" I asked feverishly.

"No. I can't," he snapped. "The beastly thing is sewn in."

We heard the Colonel's voice from the green.

"I have played sixteen," he began—then he stopped with a strangled snort. And as we topped the hill we saw him staring horror-struck at the hole, his lips moving soundlessly.

"That was a lucky shot of yours, uncle," came Molly's gentle voice from a shelter where she was knitting. "Hit that log and bounced right back into the hole."

And the brazen woman came across the green towards us literally staring me straight in the face.

"How does the game stand, Colonel Thresher?" she asked sweetly.

"The game, madam," he choked. "This isn't a game—it's an—an epidemic. He's murdered my caddy and dug a grave for him, and supplied the music—and now he's bounced into the hole." He shook his putter in the air and faced Uncle James.

"You have that for a half," said Uncle, dispassionately regarding a twenty-yard putt. Then he looked at the Colonel and frowned. "What are you staring at, confound you, sir?"

But the Colonel was backing away, stealthily, muttering to himself.

"I knew it—I knew it," he said shakingly. "It's a monkey: the damned man's a musical monkey. He's got a tail—he's got two tails. He's got tails all over him. I've got 'em again: must have. What on earth will Maria say?"

"What the devil?" began Uncle James furiously.

"It's all right—quite all right, sir," answered the Colonel. "I'm not very well to-day. Touch of fever. Tails—scores of tails. Completely surrounded by tails. Some long—some short: some

with loops—and some without. Great heavens! there's another just popped out of his neck. Must go and see a doctor at once. Never touch the club port again, I swear it. Never——"

Still muttering, he faded into the distance, leaving Uncle James speechless on the green.

"What the devil is the matter with the fool?" he roared when he had partially recovered his speech.

"I don't think he's very well, Uncle," said Molly chokingly.

"But isn't he going to play any more?" demanded Uncle. "He'd never have holed that putt, and I'd have been two up."

"I know, dear," said Molly, slipping her arm through his and leading him gently from the green. "But I think he's a little upset."

"Of course, if the man's ill," began Uncle doubtfully.

"He is, Uncle James," I said firmly—"a touch of the sun." I warily dodged two long streamers trailing behind him, and took his other arm. "What about going home for tea?"

Uncle brightened.

"That reminds me," he murmured, "I've just perfected a small device for automatically washing dirty cups and saucers."

"Splendid," I remarked, staring grimly at Molly. "You shall try it this afternoon."

THE letter came to me at breakfast—a bulky one, addressed in an unknown hand. The eagle eye of my hostess's small son had at once spotted the stamp, and an instant demand had gone forth that it should be presented to him in due course. It was a Tonga Island—one of those nice stamps which portray strange birds and animals in beautiful colours—and even as I promised he should have it, I was trying to think who on earth could be writing to me from such an outlandish spot. The letter had been re-addressed on to me from my club, and after a while, in deference to young Jack's continued demands for the stamp, I gave up the delightful pastime of guessing and opened it. There were two enclosures inside: one a heavily-sealed envelope addressed to me in a well-known hand, but one that I had not seen for many long years; the other just a covering letter.

It was the envelope I studied first. What could have induced dear old Mark Danver to break the silence of years, and then label his letter "strictly private?" And what a strange coincidence that it should have reached me in this of all houses!

Then I glanced at the covering letter, and for a moment I felt as if someone had given me a blow

in the face. It was from a firm of lawyers, and was brief and to the point.

"*Dear Sir*," it ran,—

"*The enclosed was amongst the effects of the late Mr. Mark Danver. We should be glad if you would acknowledge the receipt in due course.*"

I laid down the letter by my untouched breakfast, and stared out of the window. Poor old Mark dead—that priceless, cheery soul who had so strangely dropped out of our lives. In Tonga Island of all places. For he had known my host and hostess, too, known them before I did. And now, seated at their table, I had got the news of his death.

I don't know why I said nothing at the time; I think, perhaps, that it was because Mark had been my particular pal, and now from the grave he was speaking to me. And I wanted to hear what the old chap had to say first. So I put his letter unopened in my pocket, and I gave young Jack his stamp. And half an hour later I carried a deck-chair into the shade of a chestnut tree and carefully slit the envelope Inside were several sheets of foolscap covered with Mark's writing, and for a moment my eyes grew a little blurred. Then I began to read.

"They tell me, old man, that I haven't very long to go. The Doctor here, who diagnoses quite well

when he's sober and operates quite well when he's drunk, broke it to me this morning. Incidentally I'd guessed it already, and I can't pretend that I mind very much. But since the end is coming fairly soon, I want to write to you, my oldest pal, and explain why I have cut myself adrift from you all these last few years. And also I want to put on record a confession which will come as a big surprise to you. In case anything should happen in the future you will have it by you, and will know what use to make of it. And apart from that, it's going to be a bit of a comfort to me to put it down on paper, and know that someone I trust will see it. One gets a bit cowardly towards the end—sometimes. Depends, I suppose, on the race you've run. And if there's been a bad foul it gibbers at you and mocks you. Especially at night, when you can't sleep. I've been sleeping damnably just lately.

"There will be parts of this confession of mine that you know already; but I am going to put it down in full in case it should ever be needed. I'll tell it to you, Dick, in the form of a story—my first attempt at literary work. But they say that everyone could write at least one yarn—the yarn of their own life, so perhaps the fact that it is true will atone for lack of style. Anyway—here goes.

"It's just eight years ago this month that I was up on a shooting trip in Uganda. And on the way back through British East Africa, I went down with

a bad dose of fever. Luckily for me, there was a farm close by, and my boys carried me there. That farm belonged to a youngster whom you got to know afterwards—Jack Onslow. And since you know him I won't waste time describing him for you. Just sufficient to say that he was one of the straightest, cleanest boys that I have ever met; a white man through and through. He was there by himself growing coffee, and he wouldn't hear of my going on until I was absolutely fit. As a matter of fact I think he was glad of the companionship; it's lonely work, that sort of life, as you know.

"So I stopped on with him after I was fit, and day by day I got to know him and like him better. And then there came an evening when I asked him why he didn't get married.

"'It's not good, Jack,' I said, 'for a man to live in the wilds alone.' He turned a bit red, and fumbled in his pocket. Of course, I guessed at once what he was looking for, but I tried to look suitably surprised when he handed me a battered leather case.

"'I'm engaged, old man,' he said, a bit awkwardly. 'There's her photograph. And I'm just trying to get the place into a real going concern before she comes out to join me.'

"I took the case and I opened it, and I tell you, Dick, I was staggered. It was just a coloured photograph of a girl, and for sheer flawless beauty I had never seen her equal. She was more than

beautiful—she was lovely, with the sweetest expression in her eyes. And I just sat there holding the portrait in the circle of the lamplight, drinking her in.

"I hardly heard what Jack was saying, so absorbed was I in that perfect face. He was rambling on, talking a little disjointedly, a little shyly. His face was in the shadow, and for a while he talked of the things that lie deep down in a man—the things which it is not given often for another man to hear. I don't suppose he evolved a single original idea, but who wants original ideas? He just told me in a queer, half-jerky voice of his hopes and plans; of what life was going to bring him; of what he was going to do. But always he came back to his girl; it was 'we'—never 'I.'

"'She's wonderful, Mark,' he said, and he took the frame out of my hand. 'She's such a marvellous pal.'

"'Well, frankly, Jack,' I answered, 'I felt nervous when I saw you producing that frame. I have suffered before from lovers' rhapsodies, and my sole coherent thought was that it's lucky we don't all think alike. But this girl of yours strikes me as being the loveliest thing I've ever seen. You're a lucky devil.'

"He looked at me quietly.

"'Wait till you see her yourself, Mark. She's a thousand times more lovely than this photograph.' I smiled, and reached for the whisky bottle.

"'I'll take your word for it, old man,' I said. 'In the meantime, a final night-cap, and I'm turning in.'

"And I remember that night, as I was going to my room, I looked back at the wrong moment. He had his lips pressed to the picture, and I could almost feel the savage intensity of his longing. It is not good for a man to be alone in the Tropics.

"I suppose it was a week later that it happened. I was returning from shooting when the native house-boy met me gibbering like a monkey. He was in the last extremity of terror, but I caught enough to make me start running like a hare towards the bungalow. Outside, the other servants were cowering together like frightened sheep, and I dashed past them up the steps and into the living-room. Seated at the table, quite motionless, with a revolver in his hand and an empty bottle of whisky beside him, was Jack Onslow. In the other hand he clutched a letter, and in front of him was a copy of the *Times*.

"He paid not the slightest attention to me, though once his eyes, with a dreadful glitter in them, stared at me and through me. Then he began to laugh, harshly and discordantly, and my first thought was that he'd gone mad. Such things have happened before in the back of beyond. Then he stopped laughing and stared at me again.

"'Mark Danver, isn't it?' he croaked. 'Well,

sit down, Mr. Mark Danver, and don't dare to move, or I'll plug you as full of lead as a mine. Because I've been telling you lies—packs and packs of rotten damned lies—and you've got to hear the truth. I've told you, haven't I, that there was a girl in England of surpassing beauty? I was engaged to her, Danver, that wonderful girl. I was going to marry her, Danver, and she was going to come out here and live with me. I've shown you her photograph, haven't I?' He stared at me, and his head nodded a little. 'Speak, damn you, speak!'

"'Yes, Jack, you've shown me her photograph,' I said quietly.

"'Well, if you look behind you on the wall you can see it a second time.'

"I looked over my shoulder and saw the frame nailed to the wall. He'd been shooting at it with his revolver, and more than one bullet had gone clean through the picture.

"'That's what it's worth, Mr. Danver. That's all that rotten girl is worth. I've put five shots through her, and there's one left here for me.' He laughed again discordantly, and began muttering to himself: 'A fool there was, and he made his prayer.'

"'You haven't told me yet, Jack, what's happened,' I said steadily. At all costs I had to calm him sufficiently to get his revolver away from him, and to do that I wanted to get close to him without

making him suspicious. Jack Onslow was mad right enough, but only with drink, for he was usually an abstemious boy.

"'Haven't I told you?' he snarled. 'What a regrettable oversight! Well, I'll tell you now. This wonderful girl of mine has married another man. It's all quite in order; they've put it in the *Times*, and if you come round here you can see the announcement.'

"It was what I was waiting for, and I crossed the room to his side. I didn't look at the *Times*—that could wait; but I caught his right wrist. He wasn't expecting it, and anyway I was a stronger man than he. And the next instant I'd slipped his revolver into my pocket.

"He sprang to his feet, and for a moment or two I thought he was going to strike me. And then, quite suddenly, came the change. After all he was but a boy. He just crumpled up in his chair and, putting his arms on the table, he laid his head on them and sobbed like a little child. No—that is not right, for a child's tears are as a passing shower. And Jack Onslow sobbed as a man sobs, and there is no more dreadful sound in all this world. But I knew the danger was over.

"After a while he grew silent. Only a deep shuddering breath every now and then told me he was conscious: except for that he was motionless in his exhaustion. And my heart bled for the boy.

"I had seen the announcement in the *Times*—

scored and scored again by Jack with a thick blue pencil :—

"'*Dryden: Barstairs.—On the 5th May, at the Old Parish Church, Okehampton, Herbert Dryden to Joan Barstairs, only daughter of Captain Barstairs, late of Royal Navy.*'

"And I marvelled in my mind that such a girl as she had seemed to me from her picture could do such a thing.

"At length his breathing grew quieter, and he slept. I didn't touch him or disturb him; it was better to let Nature have her way. Through all the dreary months ahead he'd have to suffer; let him sleep now and forget. So I left him there with the letter still clutched in his hand. And when he woke the African night had come down and the lamps were lit.

"He sat up and stared at me dazedly across the table. Memory hadn't come back; he didn't realise what had happened. And then he saw the letter in his hand, and his face went haggard.

"'I've been asleep, Mark?' he asked.

"'Yes, old chap,' I said, 'you've been asleep. I want you to eat some dinner now.'

"He shook his head.

"'It was that whisky,' he said, slowly. 'I've been mad. Did I say some terrible things, Mark, about Joan?'

"He steadied his voice well—remarkably well—as he said her name.

"'Whatever you may have said, Jack,' I said, putting my hand on his shoulder, 'it was only I who heard you. And when a man's lowered a bottle of whisky neat, only a fool pays any attention to what he says.'

"He looked at me, and his eyes were tired.

"'Dear old Mark,' he said, 'I think you saved my life. It's in here'—he touched his forehead—'like a bad dream—all that happened after you came in. But what I want you to understand, old man, is that it's not her fault. It's not one little bit Joan's fault. It's all in her letter here. You see, this man Dryden had her father in his power. Something about money it was; dear old Barstairs is the biggest fool in the world over money. And he threatened to ruin him and her mother unless she married him.' He shook his fists suddenly in the air, and the sweat glistened on his forehead. 'Great God!' he shouted, 'what a swine that man must be!' Then he pulled himself together again and went on quietly: 'So, you see, she couldn't help it—my little girl. She couldn't see her father and mother made penniless beggars, could she? So she sacrificed herself for them. It's all down here in the letter.'

"'Confound it all,' I snapped, 'it seems to me she sacrificed you as well.'

"For a moment his shoulder shook and he turned

away. Then he steadied himself, and I went out on to the verandah. I wasn't in the mood to hear any more excuses about the girl; to me the big tragedy was the one at hand—that priceless boy. And then I heard his voice again, and looked back into the room.

"He was standing by the photograph and I think he'd forgotten my existence for the moment, or else he thought I'd gone into the compound. But as he took it down from the wall he spoke.

"'Forgive me, my darling. I couldn't help it. I was mad. But I understand. Joan; I understand now.'

"And damn it, Dick, I couldn't have spoken at that moment if my life had depended on it.

"That's the first part of my confession, old man. You will probably say to yourself that up to now there's been nothing to confess. Quite right; but I had to put it down in detail so that you should know the terms I was on with Jack Onslow. He was a pal of mine—almost as great a pal as you yourself, save that he was a younger man. I want to make that clear; I want to emphasise it, for it has a big bearing on what is to come.

"I suppose it was a month later that I left Jack. He was still carrying on, but all the spring had gone out of his work. Only once did he allude to the girl, and that was the night before I left.

"'What's the use, Mark?' he said, with an odd

twisted smile. 'I was doing it for her, and now, what's the use?'

"The next day I left him. I was going back to England, and I remember looking back as the road turned for a last view of the farm. Jack was standing on the verandah and he waved his hand once. Then he went inside, and I pictured him sitting at the table staring in front of him with hopeless eyes.

"'What's the use, Mark; what's the use?'

"His words were echoing in my brain, and as I rode on I made up my mind that when opportunity offered I would seek out Mrs. Dryden and I would paint a picture for her which she would not forget in a hurry. I would tell this girl exactly what the salvation of her father had meant to Jack Onslow. And it was three months later that I arrived in Okehampton with the intention of looking for her.

"Of course, I had no idea where she was living, but since the wedding had taken place there I thought I should be able to get the information I wanted. And I was right; the first person I asked at one of the hotels told me where they lived. Then he looked at me a bit curiously.

"'Do you know him—Herbert Dryden?'

"'No,' I said briefly, 'I don't. What sort of a man is he?'

"'You'll see for yourself,' he answered, and I couldn't get any more out of him. But his tone of voice spoke volumes.

"And as I ate my lunch I reflected that she deserved all she got; my mind was still sore over Jack.

"I'm not going to weary you with a long account of how I got to know Dryden. It was through Brayfield, a major in the Gunners, who was in camp there, as a matter of fact. I'd known him in the past, and he asked me up to dine one guest-night. And Dryden was there—a thin-lipped, austere-looking man of about fifty. His face seemed to be set in a continual sneer, and his eyes were cold and fishy. I remember I asked Brayfield about him, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"'He's exactly what he looks like,' he remarked. 'Personally, I think he's one of the most horrible swine I've ever met in my life, and how he ever induced his wife to marry him is one of those things which are beyond human comprehension.'

"'What sort of a girl is she?' I asked, carelessly.

"'Well, I don't think I'm exaggerating,' he answered, quietly, 'when I say that she is the sweetest and most lovely woman I've ever seen in my life. And,' he finished up savagely, 'he treats her like a dog. By the way, you paint, don't you?'

"'I dabble in it,' I said, rather surprised at the question.

"'So does he,' answered Brayfield. 'I'll introduce you to him after dinner, and he's sure to ask you up to his house. And then you can see his wife for yourself.'

"It fell out as he said. Dryden, it appeared, was inordinately proud of his water-colours, and liked nothing better than to show them to an appreciative audience. And since I wanted to get to the house I exaggerated my ability somewhat.

"I went up the next day to lunch. It was a big house, standing in rather a lonely position. The grounds were well kept and extensive, and it was evident that Dryden had money. And a woman who could chuck Jack and marry Dryden for money must be pretty rotten. I'm afraid I didn't pay too much attention to the ruined father stunt; in fact, I had almost forgotten it. All I could think of was Jack sobbing his soul out as the night came down on his farm in Uganda.

"And then I saw the girl. You know her, Dick, so I won't bore you with trying to describe her. But all I could realise at the moment when I saw her picking some flowers in the garden was that Brayfield had understated the case. She had on a cotton frock—I can remember it as if it were yesterday—and when she saw me she put down her basket and came towards me.

"'How do you do?' she said, holding out her hand. 'My husband will be here in a moment.'

"I stood there, Dick, like a callow schoolboy gaping at her, and then, moved by some uncontrollable impulse, I blurted out what was in my mind.

"'Why, in Heaven's name, have you smashed Jack Onslow's life?'

"For a moment I thought she was going to fall. Every vestige of colour left her face and she swayed dizzily. Then she pulled herself together, and I heard her agonised whisper :—

"'Don't mention it before my husband, for God's sake!'

"I heard a step behind me on the gravel, and turned round to find Dryden approaching. By day he looked even more unpleasant than at night, and it was with a feeling almost of repugnance that I took his hand.

"'I see you have introduced each other,' he remarked, suavely. 'Mr. Danver is interested in painting, Joan; and—what should appeal to you more—he has been in Uganda.'

"Every word came out like a drop of iced water, and he was watching her as a cat watches a mouse.

"She was superb.

"'Indeed!' she said. 'How interesting! It must be a most fascinating country.'

"She led the way towards the house, and we followed. Every hard thought I'd had about her had vanished—just been blotted out. I knew that it wasn't her fault—that Jack had been right. Knowing her as you do you'll understand my sudden conversion. All I knew and felt for certain was that some damnable tragedy had taken place, and that this fish-eyed brute was at the bottom of it.

"I wish I could give you some idea of the devilish

way he treated that wonderful, glorious girl. At lunch that day, for instance, he wouldn't keep off the subject of Uganda ; asked me if by any chance I knew a man called Jack Onslow ; hoped that he was in the best of health and spirits ; trusted that he would marry some nice girl soon. And all the time his eyes were fixed on his wife—searching her face to see if his shots had got home. And I, fool that I was, had added to her burden by telling her that she'd smashed Jack's life.

"Not by the quiver of an eyelid did she let her husband see that he'd scored. She sat there calm-eyed and disdainful, and I was torn between a desire to cry : 'Well played, you topping girl,' and a positive craving to hit the swine in the face.

"She disappeared after lunch, and Dryden bored me with his rotten paintings. I escaped as soon as I could ; I felt I couldn't bear the man any longer. And I wanted to see the girl again, and tell her that Jack was all right and that he understood. But there was no sign of her about the garden, and with a sick feeling of impotence I walked out over the moors. I felt I wanted to get away into the open, and try to get the taste of Dryden out of my mouth.

"And then quite suddenly and unexpectedly I came on her. She was sitting down in a little hollow, and a terrier was at her feet. She stared at me as I came up, and the hopeless misery in her eyes made me catch my breath.

"'So I've smashed his life, have I?' she said at length.

"I sat down beside her on the grass.

"'He's better now, Mrs. Dryden,' I answered, gently. 'But I was with him when the news came—and he took it hard. Tell me—why did you do it?'

"And then little by little the whole story came out. She wasn't very clear on the business points involved, but I gathered that it was concerned with a mortgage. Her father had speculated—led on, as she found out later, by Dryden. Then he had mortgaged his house and Dryden had taken it up—only to threaten to foreclose a month or two later. It was utterly impossible to find the money, and Dryden's price for not foreclosing was—her.

"She had told him everything—gone down on her knees to him, but it was useless. He had wanted her for years, and her love for Jack Onslow was nothing to him. He wanted her for his wife, and he was going to have her for his wife. Otherwise utter absolute ruin for her mother and father. That was the choice he gave her.

"'You heard him at lunch to-day, Mr. Danver,' she said, and her voice was trembling. 'It's always the same. I believe he hates me; hates me because I won't pretend what I can't feel. I know I hate him, and though he forced me to marry him, he can't force me to love him. There will never be anybody in my life but Jack. And if'—

the tears were running down her cheeks—'if you see him again, will you tell him so? Tell him that Tim and I come out here and talk about him.' She laid her hand on the dog's head. 'Tim is his dog, you know.'

"I bit at my pipe, Dick, and sat there like a tongue-tied fool.

"'Don't tell him I'm miserable, because that would make him miserable, too. But don't tell him I'm happy, Mr. Danver, because I couldn't bear him to think I could be happy tied to Herbert.'

"'But look here, Mrs. Dryden,' I cried, 'why go on like this? A man who could drive such an abominable bargain as your husband has, doesn't deserve the slightest consideration. Write to Jack, and tell him to come home and take you away with him back to Uganda. It would be less wrong than going on as you are.'

"She gave a little pitiful smile.

"'Three days after we were married, Herbert informed me that he still held the mortgage, and that should I be foolish enough to contemplate leaving his roof the question of foreclosing would again arise. He also stated that he was unalterably opposed to divorce.'

"And then she fell to asking me about Jack: how he was looking; how the farm was doing; all the little intimate details a woman wants to know about her man. Who looked after his clothes—of all things—God bless her. As if I knew.

"And at last, after about an hour, she rose.

"'Good-bye, Mr. Danver,' she said. 'I think if you don't mind I'd sooner not see you again.'

"'I'm going to-morrow,' I answered. 'And if I see Jack I'll tell him.'

"She gave a little choking cry and was gone, stumbling over the rough ground, with Tim scampering round her feet. And having watched her out of sight I turned and strode away over the moor. I felt I'd like to hit somebody or something; I felt that life could hold no more wonderful joy than ten minutes alone with Herbert Dryden and a rhinoceros-hide whip. And at that moment, Dick, I saw him.

"Sometimes now I think it was Fate's inexorable decree; sometimes now I think that it was intended from the beginning of things. And then, at others, I lie sweating in the night and wonder. You know that they brought it in as an accident. You know that he was found with his head crushed in at the bottom of Dead Man's Pool, with his easel and his camp-stool on the edge of the cliff two hundred feet above. You know that at the inquest I gave evidence to the effect that I had seen him stand up with his pencil in his hand as if to take some measurements, and suddenly stumble and disappear into the depths below. And they brought it in as a sudden attack of vertigo.

"It was a lie, Dick; I murdered him. I killed

Herbert Dryden that evening at Dead Man's Pool, and I leave the verdict in your hands.

"He saw me coming towards him and he waved his hand.

"'Having a look round for some local colour?' he cried. 'Well, you won't find a better place to start than this. I've done it half-a-dozen times and the light is never the same.'

"I stood by his side in silence, watching him work. For an amateur he wasn't at all bad, and had he been anybody else I should have been interested. It was an ideal spot for a sketch, with some wonderful colour effects. Deep down below us lay the sheet of black water—sombre and sunless—with the sinister name earned from tragedies of the past. Once, presumably, an old quarry, now it was disused, and the local people avoided it.

"There were stories told about it: one in particular of a hard-riding, hard-living squire of a bygone day, whose horse had bolted with him and gone over the edge. And it was said that the great shout of 'Gone away' which he gave as he realised that he'd come to the last fence, and was falling like a stone into the depths below, could sometimes now be heard echoing faintly over the moors.

"The top of the quarry lay in a little depression, so that we were at the bottom of a saucer, so to speak. And for a while I watched him getting in the wonderful yellow of the broom on the opposite

side of the pool. He worked in silence, his fishy eyes absorbed in their task, until suddenly he put down his brush and looked at me.

"'So you know Jack Onslow,' he said, with an ugly smile. 'Tell me about the young swine.'

"It was then that something snapped, Dick; up to that moment I swear I had no thought of what I was going to do. But in my brain I could see only two pictures—Jack sobbing his soul out across the table, and this fish-eyed brute gloating in front of me.

"But I didn't do anything rashly; to this day I can remember how ice-cold and clear my mind felt.

"'I think it should interest you, Mr. Dryden,' I remarked, 'to know that one of the last times I saw Jack Onslow, he was mad drunk on a bottle of whisky. He had a photograph nailed to the wall of his bungalow, and he was firing at it with his revolver. And the photograph was of your wife.'

"I took one quick look round: there was no soul in sight. And then I picked up a huge stone lying at my feet. There was just time to see the unholy joy on his face turn to a fearful terror—but no more. I brought the stone down on his head with all my force, and he fell over the edge like a log. I heard the crash as he hit the rock below, and then he toppled into the pool. Finally, I threw the stone far out into the water, picked up his camp-

stool, which had fallen over, and went straight back and gave the alarm.

"The result you know; there was no known motive for my killing him; there was never even any suspicion of it. It was an accident—and as such it has remained to this day.

"But now, old Dick, as my own last fence is looming in sight, it haunts me sometimes. Was I justified in doing such a thing? Can anyone ever be justified in doing such a thing? When I can't sleep o' nights, I see those eyes of his staring at me out of the darkness—and they mock me. They seem to say: 'You're coming too, Mark Danver; you, who dared to judge me.'

"But it wasn't for myself, Dick, that I did it—that much I can say. It was for Jack and that wonderful girl. And when those eyes of his get very bad there's another picture comes to my mind, and the eyes fade away. I see again Jack's farm, with Jack standing on the verandah. On his face is a look of dawning wonder, as he stares at the girl standing beside him. Just once he passes his hand across his eyes, and I hear him whisper: 'Dear heavens! but I'm dreaming.'

"And then she goes to him and her arms are round his neck.

"'Not dreaming, my darling—it's truth. It's all come right at last.'

"At that I leave it. They must never know, Dick; they must never have an inkling that it

was not an accident. But now that I'm going, I've written this to you in case anything ever happens. It's not likely to, so long after, but it might. And if it did—you know.

"The final punishment will lie in other hands, though it's begun already. These last few years have been hell. That's why I've buried myself and cut adrift from you all. You see, I loved her, too, as I never believed I could have loved a woman. That's another thing they must never know.

"Good-bye, old chap."

For a while I sat staring across the sunlit garden. On the lawn young Jack was being instructed in the rudiments of cricket by his father, while his mother kept wicket. And even more did I marvel at the strangeness of the coincidence that had brought Mark's letter to me in this of all houses.

At last the game was over, and young Jack departed with his nurse. And as they watched him go I saw Jack Onslow turn to the girl at his side. For a moment he looked at her as a man may look at only one woman, and she gave a little happy laugh. Yes—it's all come right at last, dear old Mark—it's all come right.

"MELODRAMA is a loose phrase." The Actor leaned back in his chair and surveyed his guests thoughtfully. "A farce is a farce all the world over; so is a comedy. So, to a lesser extent, perhaps, is tragedy. But melodrama—well, what is melodrama? Understand me. I am not alluding to gorgeously-staged shipwrecks and horse-races at Drury Lane. I want more than that. I want a definition that will include everything that the world calls melodrama."

The Writer splashed some soda-water into his glass.

"Roughly I would give this as a definition," he said. "The presentation of exciting things, which really do not happen in ordinary life, in a sufficiently plausible manner to make them appear convincing. Gentlemen-burglars, revolvers in the drawing-room—all that sort of thing."

"And yet there *are* gentlemen-burglars," retorted his host. "And a few weeks ago in the papers was the picture of two men lying dead in a street in New York: they had killed one another with revolvers. Because no one has ever flourished a pistol under my nose, does that make a gun-man melodramatic?"

"He might very reasonably be a melodramatic figure on the stage," argued the Doctor.

"Not in a country where gun-men are common," cried the Actor. "The standard must vary. Melodrama in London may be the most natural thing in the world in Italy. And I go further——" He paused and looked at the Writer. "Things that don't happen: that is your criterion, is it? Very well; I will meet you on your own ground. And when I've told you the story of the thing which happened to me—good Lord, it's twenty odd years ago now!—you shall tell me whether you still hold to that definition or not."

With some deliberation he lit a cigar, while the other men settled themselves comfortably in their chairs to listen. The dinner had been perfect; the Actor's cigars were beyond reproach. Moreover, the Actor's powers as a raconteur were well known.

"I don't know where you all were at the time," he began, when his cigar was drawing to his satisfaction.

Anyway, it doesn't much matter. Those of you who were at home have probably completely forgotten the affair. It didn't make much of a sensation even at the time; and I don't suppose there are half-a-dozen people, outside those who were actually in the theatre when it occurred, who would remember anything about it to-day.

I had been in management rather over a year,

and, fortunately for me, very successfully. My first play had run for six months ; my second was still playing to good business. But it had reached the point when I realised that definite steps would have to be taken with regard to its successor. I had two or three possibles in my mind, and I was glancing through them one morning to make my final choice, when the telephone rang in my room.

It was Hastings, the well-known literary agent, and he asked me if I could make it convenient to go round and see him without delay. He had a play which he thought might interest me, and he wanted to talk to me about it.

As you probably know, there are agents and agents. But when a man like Hastings, who is quite at the top of the tree, rings you up on a matter of that sort it doesn't do to disregard it. So I went round to see him that morning.

" I telephoned you," he said, as soon as I was seated in his office, " because there are circumstances about the case which are a little unusual. There's the play "—he pushed it across his desk—" and I can tell you the circumstances better than I can write them."

" Before we come to that," I interrupted, " have you read the play ? "

" I have," he answered.

" Is it good ? "

" Personally I think it is very good—very good indeed. In fact, I may say that it is the best play

I have had through my hands for years." And then, with an enigmatic smile, he added: "As far as it goes."

I stared at him.

"What on earth do you mean?" I said. "Isn't it finished?"

"No—it isn't. The curtain of the last act has been deliberately omitted. But I have it on the author's own word that it is written."

"But what the deuce has he done that for?" I said, blankly. "By the way, who is the author?"

I glanced at the script. John Strangeways—a name I'd never heard of.

"That is a pseudonym," said Hastings.

"Do you know who he is?" I demanded.

"I've met him—if that's what you mean. He has been in this office; he has sat in the chair you are sitting in. But beyond that I can't say I know him." He leaned forward across the desk. "I'd better come down to the circumstances I spoke of—or rather the conditions. I may say that they are a little peculiar. In the first place—and this, I think you will agree, is very peculiar—he wants no royalties."

"What an eminently satisfactory man!" I murmured.

"He is, I gather, very wealthy," went on Hastings, "and he is prepared to pay for his caprices. Not only does he require no royalties, but he is prepared to finance the play."

I stared at him even harder.

"That means one of two things," I remarked. "Either the play is no good or the man is a little wanting."

Hastings smiled slightly.

"Neither, I think. There is a third reason—in this case I have no doubt the true one. *Cherchez la femme.* He makes it an absolute condition that Paula Vendon should play the part of the heroine."

"Paula Vendon," I said. "I've heard of her, but—what's she doing now?"

I *had* heard of her in the way one hears of a lot of people on the stage with whom one never comes in contact. Certainly she had never done anything big.

"At the present moment she is playing a small part at the Haymarket," said Hastings.

"Can she act?" I asked.

"To tell you the truth, I really don't know," he answered.

"I thought there was a catch somewhere," I said, fingering the script. "Let's have the other conditions."

"The second of them is similar. A man called Leslie Merrill is to play the part of her lover."

"And what the devil am I to do?" I exclaimed. "The butler——"

Hastings smiled.

"It will be clearer when you've read the script," he answered. "You are to play the husband, which is the biggest part in the cast."

"I've heard often of men financing a play for a woman," I said, "but it's the first occasion to my knowledge when a man has been included. What sort of a fellow is this John Strangeways?"

"He struck me as a hard-headed business man," answered Hastings. "There is a trace of something Southern in him, though not marked, and his real name is as Anglo-Saxon as his *nom de plume*. Moreover, I should think he's got the devil of a temper when roused. However, there are one or two other conditions which I'd better tell you. Under no circumstances is either Miss Vendon or this man Merrill to be told that it was at the author's wish that they were given these two parts. It must come direct from you, as if it was your original idea. And, finally, the finish of the last act will not be given to you until the evening of the first night."

"But that's preposterous," I said, a little angrily. "The finish of the last act must be rehearsed the same as everything else."

"The very thing I pointed out to him," remarked Hastings, lighting a cigarette. "But I am bound to say that he had a very good reason—or, at any rate, as good a reason as one could expect. He tells me that the play is complete—save for one line: a line to be spoken by you. Since the tag is never spoken during rehearsal—he is quite well up in theatrical customs—he argues that that one line is not wanted till the first night. I have, as I told

you, read the play myself, and he's quite right. The play is finished—but for a line, and a little action. Anyway, it's an unalterable condition."

"Hang it all, Hastings," I said, irritably, "the whole thing strikes me as being the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard of. You're sure the man is quite sane?"

"As sane as you or I. Undoubtedly he is eccentric, but he struck me as a gentleman who can afford to pay for his eccentricity. Candidly, Trayne, I felt just the same as you do about it. At first I was inclined to wash my hands of the whole affair. And then, out of curiosity, I read the play. Well, all I can say is, before you decide anything further, read it yourself."

Whereupon, he handed me the manuscript.

"All right, I will. When am I to meet this strange individual?"

"A condition I was almost forgetting. You will not meet him. Should there be any point which you wish to discuss with him, he would like you to do it through me. In any question of finance I am to act for him. And he particularly desires that no effort should be made to discover his identity."

"Well, I'm damned!" I muttered. "However, I'll read it, and I'll let you know my decision as soon as possible."

With that I shook hands and left him with the play under my arm. To say that I was intrigued would be to express my feelings too lightly: I was

downright curious. Any possibility of the thing being some elaborate hoax was ruled out of court by the fact that it was Hastings who was handling it. He was far too big a man to lend himself to any foolish tricks of that sort.

All through lunch at my club I tried to puzzle things out, but I couldn't see a ray of light. And it was only as I was starting to walk home that I suddenly remembered there was an extra *matinée* at the Haymarket that afternoon—my only chance of seeing the unknown's two *protégés* act. It had got as far as that in my mind.

Well, I watched them from the stalls. The girl had a small part which she filled perfectly capably ; so had the man. There was nothing to single either of them out in any way, with the possible exception of the girl's looks. She really was astoundingly pretty, with that wonderful English colouring which is unfortunately getting rarer and rarer. But you want something more than wonderful English colouring when you're going to play lead. And I saw nothing that afternoon to lead me to suppose that she had it. Of course, it might be there, lying dormant, ready to come out on a big occasion. On the other hand, it might not. At any rate, I'd seen them ; now to read the play.

I had no time that evening before I went down to the theatre, and all through my own show my mind was subconsciously dwelling on the affair.

It all seemed so strange, so unaccountable. Some kindly man wishing to do these two a good turn, perhaps, and remain unknown. But why the mystery of the missing line? Why no royalties? Why a hundred things?

At any rate, I was so intrigued that any thought of bed was out of the question until I'd read it. I started at midnight, and an hour later I sat back in my chair if anything more perplexed than ever. In spite of what Hastings had told me, I hadn't been able to rid my mind of the thought that the real reason of the mystery was that the play was bad, and the unknown author was trying to buy me. But as I put the script down I knew that Hastings was right. It was good: thundering good. I don't say that it was a masterpiece, but it was a play which anyone would have thankfully accepted on the spot and asked for more of the same kind. It was dramatic, it was tense, and it had plenty of action. I don't propose to tell you all the plot; it would only bore you. But to make what follows clear I must give you a brief outline of the end of the play—the bit that led up to the missing line. The situation was that the lady's husband, and the man whom the husband had strongly suspected of being on rather more than mere calling terms with his wife, occupied the stage. The real bone of contention, led up to in two acts of good gripping stuff, had occurred the previous night at the end of the second act. It

presupposed one of those admirable stage houses which, thank heavens! are beyond the worst nightmare of even a modern jerry-builder—the type of bungalow effect where the bedrooms lead out of the hall. Behold, then, at the finish of the second act, husband returning somewhat unexpectedly to discover wife's bedroom door locked. And coming from the room a man's voice. Now all that was well done. The audience didn't know who was in there. They had seen the lover depart earlier, after scene of renunciation: they had seen the wife go to her bedroom. They had seen her pause in the doorway, stagger a little, and gasp out, "My God! You!" Then she had disappeared. Who was it in the room? Had the lover returned through the window? Was he a dirty dog, after all?

Then husband arrives: hears voice: beats on door. After a perceptible pause the door opens and wife appears. The room is empty; the man, whoever it was, has escaped through the window. Husband accuses her point-blank: mentions the lover by name. Horror upon horror—she does not deny it. Let him think what he will. In fact, not only does she not deny it, she admits it. And then she sinks half fainting on the floor, while husband, uttering hoarse noises, beats it rapidly for the garden and a little fresh air.

Such was the situation which had to be cleared up in the third act. But before I come to that I

must mention one more character—the lady's younger brother. He hadn't come in much, though he had been seen, and his principal claim to notoriety lay in the fact that he had spent quite a considerable portion of his life at His Majesty's expense. It is also gathered that he had just laid himself open to a further sojourn in the same quarters. An undesirable fellow, but adored—as undesirable fellows so often are—by his sister.

You've guessed, of course. He was to be the saviour of the situation. He it was whose voice the husband had heard the preceding night.

"You're a stern man; you're a harsh man," says the lover. "You take no excuse for weakness. It is a fact that I love your wife; but never by word or deed has she been disloyal to you. She was frightened to tell you last night who was in her room. She thought you'd ring for the police. It was her brother who was with her: if you want proof—open that door. She lied to save him."

He stood there pointing at the door, and there the script ended. There was one line more: what was it? What was that line—and what was on the other side of the door?

Lord! you fellows, how I cursed that unknown playwright! What was this line locked up in his mind? I couldn't get away from it. It haunted me. I could think of half-a-dozen, but none of them were good. Not a single line that I could think of kept up the tension till the curtain dropped.

Was it to be a question of "My dear, forgive me, and my unworthy doubts," while the lover steals gently away to the Colonies? Were we to find the brother manacled between large policemen, as a sort of *tableau vivant?* Horrible. The bare thought of it made me shudder.

However, on one point I'd made up my mind. Missing line or no missing line, I was going to do that play next. If the worst came to the worst, and the curtain proved a bad one, I had sufficient faith in myself to think that I could substitute something or other which would prove satisfactory. After all, I had two months at least. And, furthermore, I thought it not unlikely that through Hastings I might be able to persuade the author to waive this particular condition a little nearer the time. There was no hurry about it at the moment.

Accordingly, next day I again went round to see Hastings. He smiled as I entered his office and said: "I thought you would."

"Would what?" I demanded.

"Take the play. I've got the agreement all ready for you to sign."

I read it through, and, assuredly, it was a strange document. No mention of royalties or American rights or anything of that sort. Everything was mine unconditionally, or rather I should say everything was mine subject to the author's reservations, which I had already heard. But these were emphasised in no uncertain way.

"Should the licensee," ran a clause, "break the above conditions either in letter or in spirit, the agreement shall terminate forthwith. The author or his agent shall be sole arbiters of such infringement."

I kicked at that: it seemed to put me too completely in his hands. But, as Hastings pointed out, a further clause indemnifying me against any financial loss in such an event was a very efficient safeguard.

At any rate, I signed. Not without some misgivings at the last moment, it's true; but I signed. And there I was definitely committed to the production of an unfinished play by an unknown author, with two practically unknown people in two of the principal parts.

The first thing was to get hold of them. The run at the Haymarket was almost over, so I knew they would be free when I wanted them. And I asked them both to come round to see me at my theatre one evening after a *matinée*. They came, obviously a little surprised, and when I told them what I wanted their surprise did not decrease. To play lead with me—well, I don't want to appear unduly conceited—was an immense leg-up for both of them.

"I saw you at the Haymarket," I said, "and it struck me, from every point of view, that you are just what I want in this new play."

She looked at him, and she was even prettier close to than on the stage. And he looked at her, while I looked at them both. Accept—of course they would : with fervent gratitude and joy. And even while they were stammering out their thanks, I realised one thing. Paula Vendon and Merrill were in love with one another.

It threw a light on the situation : it gave a possible solution. The unknown author was a philanthropist anxious to help these two to get married. And they'd have made a deuced fine couple, for he was a good-looking fellow, was Merrill.

Of course, as a solution it didn't explain the extraordinary condition as to the missing line, but at any rate it explained the others. And for two or three weeks I let it go at that. I got the cast together, and having completed the other preliminaries, we went into rehearsal.

First I read them the play. It's strange, isn't it, when one looks back on things by the light of future events, how a man marvels at his blindness ? And yet when I came to the end of the second act—the bedroom scene I have told you of—and Paula Vendon, white to the lips, stood up with a stifled scream, nothing untoward struck me. In fact, so incredible can the density of the human brain be, that I thought her agitation was due to my masterly reading. I had carried her away, and if that was so she might really prove an actress.

She said nothing, and after a moment or two she resumed her chair with a little apology. But all through the third act I felt her great eyes fixed on me with an almost uncanny stare, and once, when I glanced at Merrill, he, too, was looking at me with a strange intentness.

I laid down the script and an excited chorus assailed me. "What then? What's the end?"

"Ah, ha!" I laughed, "I'm not going to tell you that. That's the tag—and that's a mystery."

They loved that, of course. We're all of us children; stage people more so than most. And soon the stage was empty save for Paula Vendon and Merrill. I'd noticed them talking earnestly in a corner, and when the others had gone they came up to me.

"Mr. Trayne," said the girl, quietly, "who wrote this play?"

"A man who calls himself John Strangeways," I answered.

"That isn't his real name?" she asked.

"No. And I don't know what his real name is."

And then she looked at me as if she would read my very soul.

"Mr Trayne," she said, "you've got to tell us. What is that missing line? What lies behind that door?"

Instinctively her hand went out to Merrill, and he took it in his own quite naturally.

"My dear," I answered, quietly, "you may

believe me or not, as you like—but I don't know myself. It is a whim of the author's that that should be kept a secret even from me until—er—until later on."

I think she saw I was speaking the truth, and she turned with a little shiver to Merrill.

"Leslie—I'm frightened. The whole thing is uncanny."

"My dear child——" I began, but Merrill interrupted me.

"Don't think, Mr. Trayne, that it's fanciful imagination. The fact is——"—he hesitated a moment before taking the plunge—"the fact is that the play bears the most astounding resemblance to what actually happened to a—to a very dear friend of Miss Vendon."

"My dear fellow," I said, "is there anything unique in that? Most plays, certainly most good plays, must bear a resemblance to what has actually happened to someone. Otherwise they wouldn't be good. And the fact that this bears a resemblance to what happened to a friend of Miss Vendon strikes me as being merely a coincidence."

"That's so," he muttered, but I could see he wasn't convinced. Nor was she. Great heavens! in the light of future events I don't wonder. But who in their wildest imagination could have possibly anticipated those events? Certainly not I, for one.

The next day we went into rehearsal in earnest. Whatever misgivings Paula Vendon may have felt, she gave no further sign of them. She was ambitious—intensely so: and, what was more to the point, I soon saw that she was a fine actress. Merrill, too, was excellent: in fact, everything was going swimmingly. The only fly in my ointment was the absolute refusal on the part of the author to reconsider his condition as to the missing line. I told Hastings that I would swear on my most sacred word of honour not to let another soul know what it was, if only he would tell me. And I was met with an absolutely blank refusal. On the first night, and not till then, would the secret be revealed.

Of course, it was impossible to stop the company from talking. And after a week or two the reporters got to hear of it. This was something new: a first-class stunt. They lay in wait for me: they besieged my dressing-room, and I had to say something. And then paragraphs began to appear something after this fashion:—

"Accustomed though we all of us are to the secrecy surrounding forthcoming theatrical productions, Mr. Arthur Trayne has gone a step farther. He assures us that he himself is in complete ignorance of the final curtain of his new play. He tells us, however," etc., etc.

Then there were headlines in the weekly sporting papers:—

" What Lies Behind the Closed Door ?

" What is the Missing Line ? "

So it went on : a truly gorgeous advertisement. Never has there been such an advertisement before or since. Everybody was talking about it. Men at the club gnashed their teeth with envy : asked me if it was my idea. And quite politely, but very definitely, they flatly refused to believe me when I said it was the truth. The company didn't believe me—and after a time I let it go at that. Advertisement is an excellent thing—and since the world had taken it that way, let it remain so.

And then one day dear old Jimmy Maunders gave me a bit of a jolt. We were lunching together, and, as usual, the conversation came round to the play.

" You really mean, Arthur," he said, " that you have no idea of this curtain ? "

" Jimmy," I answered, " there are some men I don't lie to, and you're one of 'em. I haven't the ghost of a notion."

For a moment or two he crumbled his bread, while he stared at me from under his shaggy eyebrows.

" Then all I can say, old man," he said, at length, " is that I hope you won't be let down. If, after all this talking and mystery, the mountain brings forth a mouse, it won't do you any good. And, I tell you, it will have to be something

astonishingly big to survive this prolonged period of gestation."

I stared at him.

"By Jove! Jimmy, you're right," I said. "It hadn't struck me that way before. But it wasn't I who started this damned advertisement."

He laughed.

"I dare say not. But most of your friends and all your enemies will think it was."

As I said, it hadn't struck me in that light before. To have a thumping advertisement and then present the public with a thing like a damp squib is not a good thing to do. And I was under no delusions on one point. All the tentative endings which had occurred to me would produce exactly that effect. When I had thought of them vaguely at the beginning, there had been no question of this newspaper stunt. Any of them would have done at a pinch—then: now the thing was completely different. And the more I thought of it, the less I liked it. I used to have nightmares of the door opening slowly before the excited audience to reveal Miss Vendon standing on her head. And then I'd wake in a muck sweat with the jeers and hisses of the whole theatre ringing in my ears.

I redoubled my efforts through Hastings.

"Point out to the author," I said, "the position we're in. He may be eccentric; but he must want his play to succeed. And if, after this adver-

tisement, that final curtain is a frost, the whole thing will be a hopeless failure."

It was useless. Hastings fully saw my point, and did everything he possibly could.

"You can assure Mr. Trayne," was the only answer, "that the more advertisement there is the better I shall be pleased. The final curtain will not be a frost, but will be the strongest point in the play."

And with that I had to rest content. Once or twice I seriously thought of chucking up the whole thing—but I couldn't. I was too involved: things had gone too far. There was nothing for it but to carry on and trust for the best.

The date for production drew nearer and nearer, and but for that one haunting fear I should have been delighted. I knew I had a winner. The company were splendid: Paula had fairly astounded me. Whatever the cause of her first vague fears, she had apparently completely got over them, and she was superb. In her I saw my future leading lady for as long as she liked, and I told her so. She was delighted, and I watched her passing it on to Merrill in a corner of the stage, and then he said something to her and touched her hand—and they laughed a little as lovers do. A good pair; there would always be a place in the cast for Merrill as well.

It was two days before the dress rehearsal that Hastings came round to see me.

"About that bally door of yours," he began.

"He's told you!" I cried, excitedly.

"Not a word," he answered, and my heart sank. "But he wants that door boxed in so that the stage hands can't see. In fact, he wants a little room made behind the stage set, out of which that door will open."

I stared at him in amazement: the wildest thoughts were passing through my mind. You fellows probably have no idea of the astounding things which some people will submit for staging; I had.

"Good Lord, Hastings!" I said, anxiously, "what's the game? Surely he hasn't got some French cabaret ending with Paula waiting for me in a minimum of clothes—or anything of that sort! Because if that's it," I added, firmly, "I'll postpone the play. I won't do it; and people can think what they like."

Hastings hurried off, and half an hour later he rang me up.

"It's all right, Trayne," he said. "It's nothing indecent. But he wants Miss Vendon to be in that room three minutes before the end of the play. She is to be dressed in the evening frock she is wearing earlier in the act."

So I sent for the stage carpenter and gave him the necessary instructions. God! what a fool I was! As I said before, a man's blindness can be incredible. Yet who would have thought. Who *could* have thought?

The dress rehearsal went without a hitch. A few specially invited people waxed enthusiastic, though one or two of them were mildly sarcastic. The line, you see, was still missing.

"So you won't even trust *us?*" said one of them to me after. "It must be the devil of an ending, old man."

And when I told him I didn't know it myself, he smiled politely.

I don't think I've ever spent a more nerve-racking day than the next. Most of the morning papers had allusions to it—and all the evening ones: "Mystery of the Closed Door to be Solved To-night."

The demand for seats had been unprecedented: as you know, a first-night is generally a largely paper house, but there was less paper on this occasion than on any other in my career. Six o'clock came; seven—and I was getting in a fever. No inkling of what the curtain was to be had come.

Hastings rang me up, and I could tell he was uneasy himself; he'd heard nothing. And I cursed him foolishly over the wire.

I went down to the theatre, where the usual first-night fever was in evidence. And there I found Hastings looking very worried.

"Look here, Trayne," he said, "I'm sorry to say I've got bad news for you."

I stood very still.

"You mean the curtain is hopeless?" I said.

"Not quite as bad as that. But the author now states that he will not reveal the curtain until the moment comes. He wishes you to stand facing the door: Merrill with his back to it."

"But," I almost screamed, "what am I to say?"

"He says you'll know at the time. Above all things you're not to worry. He is mad keen on a success. I think," he added, in a pitiful attempt to cheer me up, "you can trust him. I have a feeling he's not going to let you down. He's not that type of man."

I nodded dully; was ever a man in such a position? A crammed, excited audience; all this damnable advertisement—and I didn't know the answer.

"If that man does let me down, Hastings," I said, savagely, "I swear to Heaven I'll never forgive you."

But he was a good fellow and took no offence.

Of course I didn't let the company know; that would have been fatal. And they played superbly. I forced that ghastly final fence out of mind as much as I could, and did my best; but at the end of the first act I heard a man's voice from the stalls: "The girl's magnificent, but Trayne's a bit mechanical for him."

Do you wonder?

The second act was a triumph. We had fifteen

curtains—Paula and I, and the girl's eyes were all dewy with happiness and success.

Then came the third. Lord! you fellows, I could feel the tension on the other side of the house; now the secret which had set London talking was to be revealed. I played in a sort of daze, and every moment it got nearer—the still-missing line. Two minutes to go; Paula was there now—behind the door. And then began Merrill's last speech:—

"You're a stern man; you're a harsh man."

I was staring at the door; and suddenly my heart began to beat in great sickening thumps. Dimly I heard Merrill's voice; but the stage was swimming. No—not nervousness: horror. Stark, unbelievable horror. From underneath the door a stream was trickling. And the stream was scarlet. It oozed gently on till it came to the carpet; and then more came and more. It took fantastic shapes; it went with little rushes—then it stopped. Then on again. It was blood.

"It was her brother who was with her. If you want proof—open that door. She lied to save him."

From a vast distance I heard his voice. And then the door opened. The audience, I was told afterwards, were literally rising in their seats; the moment had come. And to my dying day I shall never forget the terror of it. It swung open—that door; and with it came Paula. A dagger had been plunged up to the hilt in her heart, and she lay

there on the stage with a look of pitiful fear in her eyes—eyes already glazed and sightless.

And then came a voice, a harsh, terrible voice.

"Her brother was arrested by the police three days ago."

The missing line was known at last.

The next few minutes are just a blur in my mind. Someone lowered the curtain, and wave after wave of applause came from the other side. And still I stood there speechless. Up it went again; no one had seen anything in the wings, while all the time the stream grew larger and larger.

And then came the climax: Merrill had swung round and seen it, too. Clear above the applause came his agonised shout, and as he knelt down beside the girl a dead silence fell. He lifted her in his arms, and as he did so the great red stain showed clear to the people in the dress-circle.

A woman screamed, and at last I found my voice.

"Lower the curtain!" I shouted. And as it went down I called across the footlights: "A doctor, if there is one—at once."

Then I stumbled through the door—that cursed door—to find Merrill fighting like a madman with some of the stage hands. He was trying to get at a man in evening clothes who was facing him—also in the grip of scene-shifters.

"'Ere's the swine wot did it, sir," said one of them as he saw me.

"A capital performance, Mr. Trayne," said the stranger, politely. "My dear wife scored a veritable triumph."

"Good God, man!" said a voice beside me. "That's the author."

It was Hastings, and his face was as white as his shirt front.

There isn't much more to tell. Recognising the man as Paula Vendon's husband, the doorkeeper had let him pass—and it was a stage-hand up above who told me what had happened. He'd seen it all, for there was no roof on the room behind the door. Paula was standing there when he came in, and she shrank back in evident surprise at his sudden appearance. And then, before the horrified gaze of the man, who was powerless to interfere, the devil had whipped out a dagger and stabbed her. He placed her sitting against the door, and held her there till the moment came—and the door opened.

But it was Merrill himself who supplied the missing links.

"It was my fault," he muttered, brokenly. "I over-persuaded her. I forced myself to think it was only a strange coincidence—and I made her think it, too. Besides, I never dreamed, I never thought—— Who could have? You see, it was true—this play." He looked at me with sombre

eyes. "It happened—all except the finish." For a while he broke down utterly. "It was true that her brother had been taken by the police three days before he caught us, but until to-night I never realised he knew. And there was nothing wrong, Trayne, that I swear. I was in her room, but it was only to make one more attempt to get her to leave what was nothing more than a hell on earth and come away with me. But that brute would never have believed it, so I lied to him. And so did she. We said it was her brother, and he pretended to believe. And he knew all the time. For three years has that devil kept it dark, waiting for his revenge. And now—oh, my little girl, my little girl!"

He staggered blindly from my dressing-room, and I sat on, thinking dully. Reporters were seething outside, but I refused to see them. I felt that I was to blame, and yet, as poor Merrill said, who could have dreamed of such an end? Step by step that devil had led up to it—and then, in the hour of her triumph, he killed her. They found him mad; as far as I know, he's in Broadmoor to-day.

But—and this is the point—assuming that ending, without the actual tragedy, would you have called that play melodrama?

"It's not for want of asking," sighed Mrs. Tremayne. "If he's proposed once he must have done it half a dozen times. Mona simply will not give him a definite answer."

"I gather," murmured the Soldier, "that you would like the answer when it does come to be in the affirmative?"

"Naturally," said our hostess. "Ever since they were kiddies it has been our wish, and his people's, too. An understood thing. It's so eminently suitable. The properties adjoin: Desmond is an only child, and so is Mona. The two families are connected in a hundred ways by ties of sentiment and place and everything else. Desmond is standing for this constituency next election, and my old Tom is a leading light in the Conservative Association here. Besides—look at them. Have you ever seen a better-looking pair?"

And making due allowance for maternal pride, one could but agree: they were a magnificent pair. Mona—well, of course, on the subject of Mona Tremayne even I was partially dotty. At the advanced age of sixty, with senile decay coming on apace, I had the greatest difficulty in refraining from proposing to her myself. In fact, only the

certainty of her becoming hysterical with laughter restrained me. So I contented myself with being called Uncle Dick—uncle out of deference only to my grey and scanty hairs—and having the top of my head kissed. But what a darling she is!

And I admit that young Brooke was almost worthy of her. Clever, wealthy, a wonderful athlete, and very good-looking, he was essentially what would be described as an excellent match. A little inclined, perhaps, to be sarcastic; a little too intolerant, perhaps, of fools—but withal one of the best. At least so I thought.

Our hostess left us, and the Soldier relit his pipe.

"These settled things, old Dick, have a way of not coming off."

"My dear Bill," I answered, "don't forget we're hopelessly old-fashioned. As far as I can make out, if a man proposes to a girl to-day he just says: 'What about it?' and she says, 'Not a hope.' Then they push off to a night club and come home with the milk."

"Perhaps," he said. "But that doesn't apply to Miss Mona." He was staring thoughtfully across the lawn. "She's a thoroughbred—that girl."

"So, I think, is young Brooke," I replied.

He didn't speak for a while, and then he said something which surprised me.

"I wonder," he remarked. "I wonder. First-class in the show ring, I admit: a prize-winner every time. But it's a funny thing, Dick, how often

one finds a yellow streak in that type when it comes to the test."

He broke off suddenly: Mona was standing behind us.

"You two lazy men have got to come and play tennis," she said, smiling. But there was a thoughtful look in her eyes, and I couldn't help wondering if she'd heard.

Certainly it was an idea that would never have occurred to me: in common with a good many other people, I had always looked on Brooke as just about as perfect a specimen of young manhood as it was possible to find. But Bill Saunders was a man of understanding, used to men and the ways of men, and as a judge of character—male characters at any rate—I have yet to meet his superior. And after we'd finished our tennis he reverted to the subject. We were strolling back to the house together, with Mona and young Brooke some way behind.

"I hope the little girl didn't hear what I said about the yellow streak," he remarked. "But I'm open to a small bet of an even shilling that it's there. Not that, in all probability, the fact will ever come out, so your shilling is safe."

"But what makes you think so, Bill?" I demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear old man," he said, "in the course of my long and disreputable career I've run across a

good many fellows. And there have been times when an accurate appreciation of character has been of the greatest value to me. And I tell you now that if I knew I was going to find myself in a really tight corner I'd sooner have that sandy-haired boy with the snub nose and the freckles by my side than young Brooke."

"What—Stubby?" I laughed incredulously. "Dear old Stubby! Though I agree that he's an awfully nice boy. But, Bill, no one could take Stubby seriously." And Bill Saunders smiled and said nothing.

It was at school that he got his nickname, and when you met him you realised why. His real name was Jack Stretton, but so universal was the use of the other that frequently a house-party broke up with half the guests in ignorance of what that real name was. Complete strangers called him Stubby, and Stubby grinned all over his freckled face and loved it.

His age was twenty-seven, and he would not have won a prize at a beauty show. Unless, maybe, it had been a prize for eyes only. Cover up the rest of Stubby's face, cover up his short sandy hair, and one stood almost tongue-tied at the beauty of those great brown eyes of his. I've tried it, and I know.

Not that anybody had ever mentioned the fact to him. He would have been reduced to a condition of impotent bashfulness and rage, which

would have rendered him speechless. He would probably, in fact, have regarded it as a deadly insult. And yet those brown eyes of his are the most beautiful things I have ever seen in the world.

Like a spaniel's—just full of confidence and trust and love and—what is lacking in a dog—a wonderful glint of humour. That the humour was generally directed against himself was beside the point; perhaps even it increased the charm.

For Stubby was one of those dear fellows who invariably did the wrong thing. If, in any conversation, there was a chance of someone putting their foot into it, the only safe thing to do, if Stubby was present, was to muzzle him. Otherwise he would be that someone with unfailing regularity. And yet nobody could ever be angry with him for long.

He would seize a lull in the conversation to discuss the subject of wigs with some aged woman in an obvious brown toupée, and when he was frowned into silence by his hostess, would tactfully extricate himself by saying to the outraged female that he never realised it wasn't her own hair. "So well made, don't you know. By Jove! yes—rather. Corking fit. Have some muffin, won't you?"

Another of his little peculiarities was his usefulness. He was a sort of universal fag.

"Stubby, darling—will you be an angel, and trot back to the house? I've left my parasol in the hall."

And Stubby would trot back half a mile or so, and return beaming with a large golfing umbrella.

At games, or anything in the sport line, he was probably the world's worst rabbit. When Stubby shot, strong men in his vicinity lay prostrate on the ground: when Stubby rode—well, I will not labour the point. He seemed to adopt the sentiment towards his saddle of the gentleman from the backwoods towards a spittoon.

"If you don't take that durned thing away I'll spit in it."

Similarly Stubby.

"If you don't take that durned saddle away I'll sit in it."

But it was at games that his really staggering ineptitude was most apparent. At cricket, if the batsman hit a catch in his direction he would merely pat the wicket in preparation for the next ball. And it is on record that on the one known occasion when he held a catch the umpires conferred together before giving the batsman out, in order to be certain that lunch had not been too much for their eyesight.

It was the same at tennis and golf. He was hopeless—incredibly, unbelievably hopeless. And yet withal he was a sportsman in the truest sense of the word. For the test of true sportsmanship is not the ability with which a thing is done, but the spirit in which it is done. And Stubby's spirit was pure gold clean through.

But, as I said to Bill Saunders, no one took him seriously. He was—and always would be—just Stubby. If any other man had shown such obvious adoration for Mona, Brooke might reasonably have felt uneasy. But with Stubby it didn't matter. He knew how things stood : he knew that it was a sort of tacitly accepted matter that in the fulness of time Mona would marry Brooke—in fact, we all assumed it. And that in itself was sufficient to prevent his dreaming of anything serious—for Stubby was a loyal soul.

Just as he adored Mona, so in a different way did he worship Brooke. It was almost pathetic—his admiration for this man who did everything so supremely well ; admiration untarnished by the slightest trace of jealousy. Did Brooke do something good playing cricket for the county it was Stubby who missed no ball in the telling of it ; did Brooke shoot well it was Stubby who faithfully recorded every right and left. And having done so he would then with great solemnity propose to Mona across the dinner-table.

" Some day, Stubby darling, I shall accept you," said Mona one evening. " Are you aware that this is the forty-ninth time ? "

" Fiftieth," said Stubby promptly. " You've forgotten the one at breakfast last Tuesday week."

Which was fairly indicative of the state of affairs when Bill Saunders made his shilling bet with me.

I can't say that I thought much more about it :

as he said, it was very improbable that anyone would ever discover the fact, even if he was right.

And then there occurred the Rosenthal incident.

We were having tea out of doors—the Tremaynes, Bill Saunders and I—when the Rosenthals arrived. We knew them both very slightly and they were of the type which causes one to barricade oneself in the most inaccessible attic and refuse to move. But escape was impossible, and with a sort of frozen calm we watched them descend from their car. The man had been something in the City, and was entitled on sight to a residence in the charming old-world town of Jerusalem.

They were new-comers and late-goers ; and until that afternoon I never realised the true descriptiveness of the phrase " to descend on people." They descended on us : they didn't just cross the lawn and sit down—they descended. And as they descended from one quarter Stubby ascended from another.

He was in his dirtiest pair of old grey flannel trousers, and in his arms he carried a terrier. It was moaning feebly, and it seemed a queer sort of shape, but it still had enough strength in its poor little broken body to lick his hand. They met at the tea-table, and suddenly I heard Mona give a little gasp. And she was not looking at the dog—she was looking at Stubby. For there was that in his eyes which I had never seen before—blind, black rage.

"Are you aware, sir," he said, "that you ran over my dog one hundred yards down the road, and then failed to stop when I shouted to you, though I saw you look round?"

It was an awkward moment, but worse was to come. As I have said, Stubby was in his oldest clothes, and the mistake was perhaps excusable. To the gentleman who had been something in the City there seemed only one solution. It was most annoying: he could hear his wife breathing heavily at such an unfortunate contretemps. Just as they were calling on one of the leaders of The County Set, and she with her best pearls on. This common young man: dreadful. . . .

"There, there, my man," he remarked suavely. "How very unfortunate. Here's a fiver for you to—er—buy another dog with."

And once again Mona gave a little gasp.

"You splay-faced swab!" said Stubby, slowly and very distinctly. "You horrible parody of a human being! You cross between a bucket-shop proprietor and an Italian waiter—how dare you offer me money? If I had gloves on, you perspiring excrescence, I would make you eat your dirty fiver. Go away"—he laid the dog gently in Mona's lap—"go away from here, and never let me see you again, you—you outrage on decency! If I had a tank I'd passage it backwards and forwards over your beastly person, and howl with joy as you squashed!"

"Good God! my dear—he's mad!"

With agitation written large on their faces, the callers were backing towards their car with Stubby following them step by step. Surely Mr. Tremayne would do something: it was monstrous that they should be insulted by a common young man merely because of a wretched dog: monstrous. And yet Mr. Tremayne seemed more interested in the little brute than in them.

"I am not mad," continued Stubby, still driving them in front of him. "Far from it. And if you'd had the common decency—it's about the only common attribute you lack—to stop when you ran over my dog, I wouldn't have minded so much."

"I'll summons you for assault and battery," howled the man.

He and his wife, white and shaking with rage, were in the car by now.

"I wish you would," said Stubby. "That would finally finish your chance of getting to know anyone decent. This address will find me for the next fortnight."

The words died away on the City gentleman's lips; this terrible young man was a member of the house-party.

"Home," he snarled to the chauffeur. Heavens! how he'd take it out of the fool later for not being more careful in his driving.

"Stubby, dear!" said Mrs. Tremayne, as he

joined us after watching the car out of sight. "Weren't you just a little——"

"I'm sorry," said Stubby quietly. "I couldn't help it. Oh! my God—look at little Dick!"

He was bending over Mona, and suddenly she looked up at him. Something wet had splashed on her hand, and she was a girl of great understanding.

"Let's take him to the stables, Stubby, and see if we can do anything?"

They went off together, but there was nothing to be done. Dick would kill no more rats, and they buried him that evening in a special corner of the garden. They didn't see me; they were too engrossed in what they were doing. And when it was all over, they stood there for a moment or two looking down at the grave. It was then it happened. She took Stubby in her arms and kissed him on the lips.

"Stubby, dear," she said; "I just loved you at tea to-day."

She was gone, leaving Stubby staring after her foolishly. He was swaying a little—like a man partially dazed. And as he passed me a few moments later, completely unconscious of my presence, he was muttering to himself.

"Don't be a silly fool, you ass; don't be a silly fool!"

But there was a look on his face that hurt, and for the first time in my life I felt annoyed with Mona. I knew she'd meant it kindly, but it

wasn't quite fair to the boy. And I made up my mind, if I got an opportunity, to mention it to her.

I found Bill Saunders on the lawn, and he grinned gently as he saw me.

"A refreshing flow of language," he remarked. "But I fear it's going to be a little awkward. I gather the Hebraic gentleman is somewhat of a power politically."

"I didn't know Stubby had it in him," I said.

And once again Bill smiled and said nothing.

But it was awkward all right, and the awkwardness started at dinner.

Desmond had come over, and it soon became obvious that he was annoyed.

"I say, Stubby," he began, almost as soon as we sat down, "what is this I hear from Jackson?" Jackson was the lodge-keeper. "He spun me some interminable yarn about your having insulted that fellow Rosenthal this afternoon."

For a moment no one spoke; by tacit consent the subject had not been alluded to again.

"He killed Dick," said Stubby. "Ran over him with his beastly motor-car. Never even stopped, and then offered me a fiver."

Desmond frowned irritably.

"Well, I don't suppose he ran over the dog on purpose. And if you were in your usual rig I don't wonder that he offered you money."

"But, great Scott, old man!" cried Stubby,

" he's the most unredeemable swine, so what does it matter ? "

" It matters this," answered the other. " Your little entertainment this afternoon has in all probability cost me five or six hundred votes. I know the fellow is a swine—but he's got works in Murchester. And he's got a lot of interests in Murchester. And in this constituency the way the Murchester vote goes is very important."

" My dear old man, I *am* sorry ! " Stubby was genuinely distressed. " That aspect of the case simply never dawned on me. But surely the fact that I slanged the bounder won't affect you ? "

" Oh, Stubby—don't be such an ass ! " Desmond Brooke laughed, but his underlying irritation was still obvious. " Everybody round here knows that you and I are friends. Apart from that, the thing was done in this house, and Mr. Tremayne is the head of our association."

He laughed again and pushed away his plate.

" Doesn't matter, old man; don't worry. But next time choose someone less important to give tongue to."

" Would it do any good if I went and apologised ? " said Stubby. " I can't say that I want to, but——"

" If you do," broke in Mona calmly, " I will never speak to you again. So that's that. Now let's talk of something else."

That was that all right, but as a conversational

effort it did not add to the harmony of the evening. Brooke flushed angrily, and looked sullen ; Stubby glanced anxiously from one god to the other. And things did not improve after dinner.

In the billiard-room Desmond Brooke was studiously polite to Mona in such a marked fashion as to make it obvious. And after a while Mona laid down her cue.

"If you're trying to pick a quarrel with me, Desmond," she remarked, "say so straight out. I dislike people beating about the bush."

Only Stubby and I were there, and Desmond returned his own cue to the rack.

"Perhaps it would be as well if we could have a little private talk," he said. "I don't think there is anyone in the gun-room."

He held the door open for her, and Stubby, with misery in his eyes, watched them disappear.

"What a blithering ass I am," he muttered. "It's all my silly fault. They'll have a row now."

And I, with the memory of what I had seen in the garden fresh in my mind, marvelled that so much loyalty could exist in a human being.

There was no doubt about the row. Five minutes later the door was flung open, and Desmond, his face black as thunder, appeared.

"I say, old man——" Stubby started forward.

"Go to blazes!" snarled the other. And then

he paused ominously. "Or rather, since you seem to be the pattern of all the virtues, go to Mona."

With that he left the billiard-room, and a little later I heard the front door slam. Undoubtedly a new experience for Master Desmond; and a very salutary one.

Shortly after he had gone Mona came in from the gun-room. Her colour was a little higher, but otherwise there was no sign that anything had occurred.

"We might play three-handed, don't you think?" she said. "All against all."

"I say, Mona—what an awful box-up!" cried Stubby.

"Don't be an ass, Stubby dear," she said, quietly, and picked up her cue.

No more was said, and it wasn't until just before we went to bed that I got a word with her alone. I felt I just had to—for Stubby's sake.

"Dear child," I said, "you've had a bit of a row with Desmond, I know. And though I'm old and venerable and suffering from senile decay, I wonder if you'd let me say one thing to you?"

"Anything you like, Uncle Dick," she answered gently.

"Well, it's this. The row will blow over in a day or two, but until it does, of your mercy be careful with Stubby."

"What *do* you mean?" she said with a puzzled look on her face.

"In a way he's the cause of the row, isn't he? I mean what he did. Well, don't be too kind to him just because you're angry with Desmond. It would mean nothing to you—I was in the garden to-day when you buried Dick, and I saw you kiss him, and that meant nothing to you. But, my dear, don't forget how he adores you, and I don't want him to suffer."

"You darling," she said. "You darling! Nor do I."

And with that she left the room very quickly.

Strange how utterly blind people are at times. I suppose it is that one gets a preconceived idea in one's head, and there isn't room for anything else. Certainly during the next two months things went on as usual. Desmond came and went, and Stubby came and went, while I emulated the celebrated brook. Desmond was working full time in the constituency: a Very Great Man had come to stay for the week-end and had given as his Very Great and Considered Opinion that there was a big future in front of young Brooke.

"He has brains, money, charm and tact," he remarked, "and with those four assets a man can get anywhere."

And Stubby, who heard him, beamed all over his ugly face and said: "Top-hole. Good old Desmond!"

It seemed certain that with or without the

Murchester vote he would get into Parliament at the next election. In fact, the Rosenthal incident was forgotten. On the advice of Mr. Tremayne, Stubby had written him a short note regretting that in the heat of the moment he might have expressed himself a little strongly, and had received a curt line of acknowledgment. And there it had ended. In fact, everything seemed just as it was before it happened—except for one thing.

I noticed it in a lot of little ways—Brooke's behaviour to Stubby, but it came to a head at a big tennis tournament given by the Tremaynes. They had four courts and it was a three-day show, with one or two star performers specially invited. And in it a miracle occurred. Stubby, who received forty every game, much helped by two walk-overs, had reached the final in the handicap singles. And Desmond Brooke was the other finalist.

The result, of course, was a foregone conclusion. Stubby had no more chance—even with his handicap—of beating Brooke than he would have had of beating Tilden. But he was so keen, and he was so excited. To reach the final of anything was so inconceivably beyond his wildest dream that he was almost incoherent.

The court was crowded with spectators to see the prospective new member, and—well, dash it all—I know Brooke had the game in his pocket, but even so, he might surely have made some small

effort to appear interested. Not a bit of it; he seemed to go out of his way to make Stubby look a fool. And he succeeded.

In a story, I suppose, Stubby would have won. He didn't; I don't think he got a game. With the sweat dripping off his face he rushed wildly backwards and forwards, while Brooke—who hadn't troubled to take off his sweater—simply played with him.

And after a while people began to laugh, and Brooke began to smile. In fact, I thought I was the only person looking on who wasn't laughing till I turned round and found Mona behind me. And she wasn't laughing either. She didn't say anything, though she saw me right enough. But when it was over, and Brooke was surrounded by a bevy of admiring people, she went across to Stubby—who was mopping his face in a corner by himself. And by chance I glanced at Brooke, and caught the look on his face as he saw them. It was gone in a moment, but it was the same as it had worn when he snarled at Stubby in the billiard-room on the night of the Rosenthal incident.

It was incredible to think that Brooke was jealous of Stubby, and yet what other solution was there? As I say, the tennis tournament was only the culmination of a whole series of similar things, and for the first time I began to wonder whether the universal assumption with regard to the matrimonial stakes was correct. And I wondered even

more ten minutes later. I went over to one of the marquees to get a whisky and soda and I heard voices from the other side of a big palm. It was impossible to avoid listening, and, as I say, I wondered even more.

"Look here, Stubby," it was Brooke speaking, "I don't want to be unpleasant. But kindly remember in future that Mona is to all intents and purposes engaged to me. I don't want you making her conspicuous."

"But, good Lord, old man!" cried Stubby aghast. "I wouldn't do such a thing for the world."

"Well, be a little more discreet in future, then," said Brooke, as he left the tent.

The whole accusation was rankly unfair even if Brooke had been actually engaged to the girl. As he wasn't, it was grossly impertinent. But Stubby took it to heart badly. And during the next fortnight I often caught Mona looking at him with a puzzled frown. He used to flee from her presence as if she had an infectious disease.

"Look here, Stubby," she said to him one day, "what on earth is the matter with you? Why are you avoiding me like the pest?"

He flushed all over his face, and began stammering something or other.

"No excuses," she remarked. "I want the truth."

She listened in silence, and when he had finished there was an ominous look in her eyes.

"Thank you, Stubby," she said quietly. "I

understand. I'm driving over to Murchester to fetch Desmond now."

"You won't say anything to the old boy," said Stubby, greatly agitated.

She looked at him with a faint smile.

"There are times, Stubby, when I could kiss you, and there are times when I could smack you. I'm not certain which this is."

With that she was gone, and we watched her drive away from the door behind a spanking great bay horse. The Tremaynes had a car, but they stuck to the old-fashioned way as well, for short distances.

"I'm always putting my foot in it," said Stubby miserably. "Now they'll have another row."

"Look here, young fellow," I said, "if you take my advice you'll think a little less of Desmond and a little more of yourself. Brooke is quite capable of taking care of himself."

It was two hours later that a white-faced groom brought the dog-cart back alone. The bay was lathered in sweat, and we rushed out to see what had happened.

"Where's Miss Mona?" cried her father in an agony.

"Miss Mona's all right, sir," cried the man, "it's Mr. Stretton. For Gawd's sake get a doctor! Tim got frightened by a traction engine coming out o' Murchester and bolted for two miles. I

couldn't stop him and no more could Miss Mona. Mr. Brooke fell out: I seed him running after us. And we was coming to Bury Hill. Suddenly we sees Mr. Stretton a-walking along the road in front. He looks round and sees us, and he makes a dive at Tim's 'ead. He 'ung on, sir—and he was dragged something cruel. But 'e stopped Tim just at the top of the 'ill. And then—well, the wheel went over 'im, sir—just at the end. I've left 'im there, sir—with Miss Mona. She told me to come on and send a doctor."

Stubby was unconscious when we got there: lying on the grass beside the road with his head on Mona's lap.

"Where's the doctor?" she cried.

"Coming, my darling," said her father. "Are you all right?"

"I'm not even touched," she answered. And then her voice broke. "But oh! Dad—I'm afraid Stubby is done for. And it's all my fault."

And at that moment he opened his eyes.

"Hullo!" he said feebly. Then he seemed to remember. "Are you all right, Mona? Not hurt?"

"Not a bit, Stubby dear, thanks to you." And before us all she went down and kissed him on the mouth.

For a moment a wonderful look came into his eyes; then his mind began to wander.

"All right, old man," he muttered. "Of

course I won't make her conspicuous. As if I could—with a face like mine."

He stirred restlessly: only the touch of Mona's hand on his forehead seemed to soothe him. And always his words were of the girl, till the tears were pouring down her face unchecked, and her father cursed childishly at the non-arrival of the doctor.

But he came at last, and made his examination. And when he had finished his face was grave.

"I don't know," he said quietly. "I can't say for certain. But we must get him back to your house in an ambulance at once. Then I can make a closer overhaul."

The chauffeur was sent post haste to Murchester, while we waited there beside the road. And it was while we waited that the doctor told me what he feared—a broken back.

Poor old Stubby! Lying there, muttering out the secrets of his heart—secrets he fondly imagined we'd none of us guessed. And once the girl whispered pitifully—she didn't know I was close behind her—"You've got to pull through, old man—you've got to, for my sake."

And Stubby only muttered on.

But the ambulance arrived at last, and we got him back to the house. It was while the doctor was making his detailed examination that Mona joined me in the garden. And there was a look in her eyes which hurt.

"Dear girl," I said, "don't take it so much to

heart. After all, he just did what one would have expected Stubby to do. It's lucky Desmond wasn't hurt when he fell out. By the way, I wonder where he is."

"Fell out, Uncle Dick!" she said slowly. "He didn't fall out. When Tim bolted—he jumped. You look amazed," she continued. "I don't wonder. Even now, though I saw it with my own eyes, it seems incredible. But he jumped."

I said nothing, and after a while she went on.

"Do you remember months ago talking to General Saunders on the lawn. And he said something about Desmond having a yellow streak in him. He didn't mean me to hear—but I did. It didn't make much impression on me at the time: after all, it was only a guess on his part, and I thought that whatever other faults Desmond had in his character cowardice was not one of them. I knew he was intensely selfish; I knew he was mean—I don't allude to money matters. You can't grow up with someone and not spot things like that. I knew he was intensely jealous—and jealous in the worst way. Not jealous because he's in love with a person: but jealous because he's in love with his own position. And if I knew it before, I've known it doubly since that row between Stubby and the Rosenthals. He was furious with me for taking Stubby's side, and he's revenged himself—or tried to—on Stubby since."

She paused and stared across the park.

"But cowardice—I didn't think that." She turned and faced me squarely. "Uncle Dick—I said it was all my fault; it is. There was a moment this afternoon, just as Tim was getting out of hand, when I could have controlled him. I know it. And some devil in me prompted me to look at Desmond's face. And I saw in it stark fear. It staggered me. I remembered General Saunders' remark, and I didn't pull Tim up. Nothing seemed to matter except to see what Desmond would do. And he jumped. The groom didn't see—Tim had got away properly—and he was leaning over on my other side hauling on the reins. But I saw. He stood up swaying—and then he jumped. And just before he jumped he looked at me. He knows I know."

"Heavens!" I muttered; "it seems impossible."

"As if it mattered what he did," she went on. "Stubby is all that counts—and oh, God!—won't that doctor ever come? It's my fault—don't you see? All my fault." She was clutching my arm. "If I'd stopped Tim this would never have happened."

And then suddenly she grew very still: her father was coming across the lawn towards us.

"It's all right, dear," he cried. "Three ribs: a collar-bone: and some appalling bruises."

She swayed a little, and I put an arm round her to steady her.

"He's asking for you," went on Tom as he joined us.

"Uncle Dick," said Mona quietly. "Will you tell Dad what I've told you? But after that I don't want it to go any further."

Then she went indoors.

He heard me in silence, did Tom Tremayne, with amazement written large on his face.

"A mistake, Dick," he said when I'd finished. "She must have made a mistake."

But I could see he didn't think so.

"Why, it would break his father's heart."

"I don't see that his father need ever know, Tom."

"What's Mona going to do?"

"The betting is a fiver to a shilling that she's going to marry Stubby," I said.

"Marry Stubby!" gasped Tom. "Good Lord!"

Ten minutes later we peeped into Stubby's room.

They never even saw us, but on Stubby's ugly face there was an expression of such wonder and joy that old Tom blew his nose loudly as we went downstairs.

"Good boy," he said gruffly. "Very good boy; I suppose he's proposed and she's said yes."

But he hadn't: Mona told me that afterwards in confidence. She'd had to propose to him.

And I sent Bill Saunders a shilling postal order the next day.

THERE were five of us altogether waiting in Mombasa for the boat. She was late—held up with engine trouble or something, and they expected her in next morning. And they weren't certain even then if she'd be able to continue her voyage without a further overhaul. So there was nothing for it but to wait with what patience one could.

It was after dinner, I remember, and hot as blazes. There was Murgatroyd, the coffee man, Scott, of the police, and Simpson, a gunner, all sitting in the lounge swearing between drinks. My recollection is that there wasn't much swearing. The fourth man was a tall, rather immaculate-looking fellow with fair hair and a small moustache. His face seemed vaguely familiar to me, but I couldn't put a name to him. He was English obviously, but he wasn't communicative about himself. His voice when he talked had rather a faint, cultivated drawl, but he seemed quite a decent sort. And he was interested in things and native customs. Didn't know the country, it being his first trip down the East Coast, whereas most of us wished we didn't know it quite so well.

It was while Scott was holding forth about ju-ju that I first noticed the sixth man. He had come in quietly and was now glancing at some old illustrated papers. There was no difficulty about placing him; you meet the type all the world over. Hard-bitten, lean, fit as nails—they'll do anything from elephant shooting to running a gambling hell. Some are straight, and some are crooked—but it's as well not to trust even the straightest too far.

Scott finished, and the fair-haired man asked him some question. And quite by chance I happened to be looking at the newcomer's face just as he spoke. As I've said, it was an unmistakable sort of voice, and it appeared to give the stranger a nasty shock. The brand he belonged to can school their expressions better than most, but that voice must have just caught him napping for a moment. Remember the fair-haired man had his back to the stranger, so his face hadn't been seen. It was just the voice and nothing else that did it, and it was all over so quickly that after a moment or two I wondered if it hadn't been my imagination. With a look of surprised amazement the newcomer glanced up from his paper and stared at the back of the fair-haired man's head. And then the surprise and the amazement faded, to be replaced by a look of such devilish rage as I have seldom seen on a man's face before or since. For a second his teeth bared in a wolfish snarl; his fist clenched on

the table. Then it was over, and save for me no one had seen it.

Scott was holding forth again, and after a while the stranger got up to ring the bell. He wanted a drink, and he passed close to Murgatroyd's chair. And as he gave the order to the waiter, Murgatroyd looked at him as one does at a man, if one's not quite certain if one knows him.

"Surely," began Murgatroyd tentatively.

"You're Murgatroyd, aren't you?" said the stranger. "Thought I recognised you as I came in. I'm Bulton. Don't you remember I came back through your place two years ago? You gave me some much-needed grub."

"Of course, I remember!" cried Murgatroyd heartily. "Come and join us."

Bulton nodded and drew up a chair, and the conversation became general again. But there was one little thing which aroused my curiosity. There was no trace of recognition on the part of the fair-haired man as far as Bulton was concerned. Quite obviously he had never met the man before. Then why had that sudden look of diabolical rage crossed Bulton's face? Or had it been a trick of the light? I knew it hadn't, and, as I say, my curiosity was aroused.

It didn't occur to me at the time, though it did later, that it was Bulton who started the topic. Simpson and Scott were talking, it's true, about a native they'd hanged in the back of beyond

for a triple murder—but it was Bulton who introduced the wide subject of capital punishment generally. Was it sound, was it a good thing? Above all, did it succeed in its object?

The usual arguments were advanced for and against. It was Scott who was all for its retention, and who argued that the whole idea of punishment was that it should act as a deterrent to others, and not be regarded entirely as a punishment to the culprit. But was death more of a deterrent than, say, imprisonment for life?

Yes, emphatically, argued Scott. Men who have received such sentences may say that it is worse than death—but words are easy. Give them the alternative, and see what their answer would be. Everyone clings to life when it comes to the point.

But, I objected, principally for argument's sake, when it comes to murder, who thinks of the future? In nine cases out of ten blind insensate rage has the would-be murderer in its grip. He is out to kill; he is obsessed with the idea. He never thinks of the punishment that will inevitably be his. So does hanging act as a deterrent? And if it doesn't, isn't it too terrible a punishment?

Scott snorted—but Scott was a policeman. And it was Murgatroyd who drew attention to the mental side of the punishment.

"Surely the actual physical act of killing a man by hanging him is the least important side of the

question. The awful thing to my mind would be the three weeks' waiting. Knowing that every time the sun rose, death came one day nearer. The mental side of the punishment is the worse by far. And that can be no deterrent on others, because no one can realise what it means until they're in that position themselves."

Then the fair-haired man ranged himself on Scott's side in no halting language.

"Rank sentimentality," he remarked. "There are crimes of violence and assault which I would punish by torture rather than mere hanging. Brutal, unprovoked murders—and attempts at murder—for which no mercy should be shown in this world, or the next. Why, I know a case——" He broke off suddenly.

"Go on," said Bulton quietly, and he was staring at the fair-haired man.

"It's a case of the most brutal assault on a woman," said the fair-haired man. "The cowardly swine tried to throttle her—left her for dead and bolted. In wish, in desire, in every way save the actual deed he *did* murder her. It was only a fluke that she didn't die. And when she recovered consciousness she was so distraught that she couldn't give any clear description of her assailant."

"But was there no motive?" asked Simpson.

The fair-haired man shrugged his shoulders.

"We could never find one. She had on her pearls at the time, so it was possibly robbery——"

"And possibly not," said Bulton. "Motives are difficult things to arrive at sometimes. Strangely enough I, too, know of a very similar case to the one you have mentioned. It was told me by a—by a man I met a year ago. And he was the principal actor in the drama. He nearly throttled a woman to death, but in his case one thing was a little different. In his case it wasn't that she couldn't give any clear description of her assailant, but that she wouldn't. A change of a solitary letter which makes a considerable difference. In fact it lifts the story from what you, sir, so aptly describe as a brutal and motiveless assault into the plane of psychology. Would you care to hear about it?"

He glanced round the group and Scott nodded.

"Fire right ahead," he said. "And the calling is on me this time. Waiter—repeat the dose all round."

"I guess the name of the man who told me doesn't signify," began Bulton. "He was dying of fever when I ran across him, and I stayed with him till he pegged out. I mention that fact because he rambled a bit in his delirium, though he was perfectly lucid most of the time. But when a man rambles you either get gibberish, or very intimate truth. I got the latter, and it kind of made me see the characters of his story in a way I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. He made 'em live, in a way no mere tale of words and deeds can

ever do; got inside 'em and took me with him. And, as I say, his name doesn't signify, but I'll call him Jack for the sake of clearness.

"Before the war he'd been training to become an electrical engineer. Not a particularly bright sort of fellow, I should imagine, but at the same time no fool. Rather a shy, *gauche* boy, and, like so many shy people, he had wonderful ideals. He never expressed them; kept them locked up in his heart. Particularly the ones about women. I guess you'd never believe the extraordinary hallucinations that boy had about the other sex, though wild horses wouldn't have made him confess it. To him they were just something apart—something sacred and holy for a man to guard and cherish and work for. Damned funny, of course—and damned dangerous. For when a fellow like that gets his awakening, it hits him harder than you or me.

"However, that comes a bit later. At the age of twenty-four this boy fell in love. He fell in love as a fellow of that description might be expected to fall in love—madly, desperately, unreasonably. He'd been straight himself all his life, and he set the girl up on a pedestal about twice the height of Nelson in Trafalgar Square. And the higher he set her up, and the more desperately he became in love, the more unconquerable did his shyness become. He'd met her first at a dance—by the way, we might as well

call her Ruth—and he'd asked her for two. Incredible to relate, she gave them to him, and because he didn't dance badly, she'd managed a third. From that moment it became hopeless. Ruth filled his life to the exclusion of everything else, and even interfered considerably with his work. Not that she knew it, of course: to her he was just one of the numerous young men who came and went about the house, and who was incidentally rather duller than most. But though, perhaps, he didn't talk as much as the others, he saw a good deal more. And the first thing he noticed was the extraordinary position occupied in the household by Ruth's younger sister Molly."

Was it my imagination, or did the fair-haired man give the faintest perceptible start?

"Father, mother, Ruth—to say nothing of the servants—rotated round Molly. Her slightest whim was their law; she was fussed over, petted and flattered till it almost amazed him. True, she had been delicate when young; true, she was one of the most lovely girls he had ever seen in his life—lovelier by far than Ruth, even *he* admitted that—but was that any good and sufficient reason for such extreme adulation? Especially since the net result was that it had turned the girl into a being so supremely selfish as to render her hardly human. As her absolute right she accepted every sacrifice they made for her; she sulked for days if her smallest caprices were not instantly obeyed—

sulked, that is, provided none of the men she kept dangling after her were about the place; she wasn't such a fool as to sulk then. The best of everything was hers by divine ordinance, and if other people went without what on earth did it matter to her? And amazing as it seemed, the most devoted slave of all, the one who appeared blindest to her faults, was her sister Ruth.

"It puzzled Jack considerably. To him there was absolutely no comparison between the two girls. Molly was the prettier, though Ruth was lovely enough for any man—but there it ended. To Jack, the elder sister was so immeasurably the better girl of the two that he marvelled that the men who thronged the house didn't see it also. The family adoration he accepted as one of those peculiar and inexplicable things which just happen and must be left at that; but that outsiders should do the same defeated him. And the only person in the household who spotted his feelings was Molly herself.

"She hated him for it with a bitter, deadly hatred. She knew that he was the only man who saw through her; she found, moreover, though only she knew how hard she tried, that he was the only man who saw her frequently whom she couldn't make fall in love with her. She even went so far as to kiss him once at a dance—to kiss him on the lips unasked. And she felt him stiffen and recoil. She never forgave that, and she used to go out

of her way to sneer at him and make him feel awkward. She left no stone unturned to get him to cease coming to the house, but for one of the few times in her life she failed. You see, he thought that Ruth was beginning to like him—and he was a sticker even if he was shy."

Bulton finished his drink and lit a cigarette.

"I expect you wonder when I'm coming to the point," he went on after a moment. "But I'm trying to condense it as much as I can. To understand that fellow's story, I guess you've got to get the mentality of those two girls placed in your mind. You've got to see 'em as he made me see 'em when the fever was on him, and he was back living it all over again.

"Anyway I'll get on with it. The unbelievable thing as far as Jack was concerned happened one night about three months before he was due to pass his final examination. He didn't know how it happened—it just did, as such things have happened before. He found, of a sudden, that Ruth was in his arms—that he was kissing her, that—wonder upon wonder—she was kissing him. He felt the glory of her lips on his, the yielding of the whole of her young body against his own. He heard her whisper—'My dear, I love you,' and it seemed to him at that moment that life could hold no more. Of course, they would get married. Father and mother jibbed a bit at first, though since it wasn't Molly it didn't matter quite so much. Nothing

would have induced them to allow Molly to marry an obscure electrical engineer; for that matter, nothing would have induced Molly to have contemplated such a ridiculous course of procedure for an instant. But Ruth was different. Ruth—well, after all, Ruth was another proposition. The poor darling couldn't expect to have very many chances, overshadowed as she was by Molly. Only one thing did her father insist on. Jack must go clear away, free from all distraction, until he had passed his final exams. It was only three months, and Jack, who was no fool as I have said, agreed with the wisdom of the course. So he went away and he worked as he'd never worked before. He buried himself in the country, and he slaved for fifteen hours a day. By a supreme effort of will he banished all thoughts of the girl from his mind—at least almost all thoughts. Just occasionally he'd sit and dream of the years to come—the wonderful years. And then he'd go back to volts and amperes and things and cover more paper with uninteresting figures. He passed all right—passed with flying colours, and then he went to see Ruth."

Bulton paused, and there was a strange look in his eyes.

"It was her father who told him what had happened—told this idealistic boy the incredible thing. And he was a stern man, the father, a bit of a Puritan for all his stupidity over Molly.

"'I wouldn't tell you before your exam.,' he said to Jack. 'It wouldn't have been fair to put you off. But Ruth is no longer a daughter of mine. I have disowned her.'

"Jack sat there in the study, and he was swallowing hard.

"'What do you mean?' he stammered at length.

"And then it came out. Of all people in the world, a roller-skating rink instructor! At least she might have chosen a gentleman. Jack knew the fellow; had seen him in a red uniform giving lessons once or twice when he had skated there. Good-looking in a flashy way.

"'But when were they married?' he blurted out.

"And the elder man's voice was terrible as he answered:

"'They are not married,' was all he said."

Once again Bulton paused, and I glanced at the fair-haired man. And he was staring at Bulton with a sort of savage intensity.

"It mightn't have hit some fellows quite so hard," went on Bulton after a while. "But you've got to remember what manner of boy Jack was. When he lived it over again in his delirium, when his mind was back in the days that followed, I got to see into his soul. It killed him mentally and morally as surely as a revolver bullet can kill physically. From being an idealistic boy, he

turned into a bitter man, cursing women and all their ways. He felt that he'd staked his all and lost, and deliberately he set out to get his own back on the whole sex. Not pretty, I grant you—but when you start monkeying with a man's soul something's going to happen. He had made just one inquiry to substantiate her father's statement and that was to Molly. And Molly, looking very sweet and lovely, had given a pathetic little smile and nodded.

"'Poor dear Jack,' she had whispered in a choking whisper. 'Poor dear boy.'

"That had settled it; there was no more to be said. He chucked everything, and went abroad. And for five years he lived a life of which the less said the better. But in one way it had its effect; up to a point he forgot. Not quite, mark you—but up to a point. And then came the war.

"Now I'm not going to weary you with what he did during that performance, since he did no more and no less than thousands of others. But there came the moment when he stopped one in the shoulder, and the R.A.M.C. having taken him into their coils, deposited him in a base hospital near Etaples. And there on the first night he saw her; saw the woman he hadn't seen for nine years. For a while he thought it was a fever dream. She had just come on duty, and with a shaded lamp in her hand she was walking slowly between the two

ranks of muttering and restless men. And at the foot of his bed she paused and their eyes met. He knew then that it was no dream but reality.

"'Jack!' he heard her whisper, and she came and laid her hand on his forehead—a hand that was trembling. And with the concentrated bitterness of nine years' hell in his mind, he cursed her savagely and horribly. He said dreadful things to her—wicked, inexcusable things—and she answered never a word. She just stood there beside his bed looking at him, and in her eyes there was no reproach. Just divine pity and love and a wonderful tenderness. And he, miserable fool that he was, could only see a rink instructor in a red uniform."

The sweat was standing out on Bulton's forehead, and he drained his whisky at a gulp.

"They came over that night—the Bosches. You remember, of course, the big Etaples raid when they got the hospitals. They got the one Jack was in, and when the mess had been cleared away he scrambled madly out of bed and through folds of flapping canvas with sick fear in his heart. For the bomb had burst in her end of the marquee, and everything—rink instructor included—was forgotten. He was a boy again, and she was the girl of his dreams. And, thank God! he got to her before she died.

"At a glance he saw it was hopeless, but she held

out her arms to him. And with a great cry he caught her to his heart.

"'Forgive me, my dear,' he sobbed. 'Forgive those awful things I said. Who am I to judge?'

"'Forgive me, Jack,' she said gravely. 'I realise now, I have realised for many years, that I had no right to sacrifice you.'

"He looked at her wonderingly.

"'What do you mean, Ruth?'

"'Dear lad,' she said, and her voice was growing weaker, 'you don't really think I did it, do you? I hoped you'd come and let me explain. But you didn't and I couldn't find where you'd gone.'

"I think his heart was beating in great sickening thumps just then. I think he stared at her as a man bereft of his senses.

"'What are you saying?' he muttered. 'My darling—speak to me!'

"But the end was very near, and with a sudden passionate madness he strained her to him.

"'Stay with me, darling!' he almost shouted, but with a pitiful little smile she shook her head. And with one last supreme effort she raised herself and kissed him on the lips. Then she died.

"They found him wandering about the sand dunes the next morning, partially demented. They thought it was shell shock from the effects of the bomb, and they sent him home. I don't really wonder at their diagnosis, because he was obsessed

with one idea. And apparently, he often talked aloud about it in his sleep. It was such a strange idea that I'm not surprised they kept him on for far longer than necessary in a charming country house, devoted to nerve cases. He wanted to find a rink inspector in a red uniform—that was all. But quite enough, in all conscience, for grave men who talked learnedly about mental aberrations and nerve centres and other dull things.

"It was just about armistice time that they let him go, and in due course he was demobilised. And then, systematically, he started on his search. He never gave up hope though he pursued false clue after false clue. He advertised for six months continuously in every paper he could think of without avail. And finally, he ran his quarry to ground not half a mile from the rink where he had been instructing. He'd come back there after wandering round the country, and he was doing a clerk's job in some garage. At first he was suspicious and uncommunicative—but finally he was persuaded to talk. And with an occasional smirk of self-complacency on his face he admitted several things. Naturally, no gentleman speaks of such matters, but since it was ancient history now, there seemed to be no harm. Though, of course, it must go no further. He remembered the girl well—a nice little soul; very pretty. Her people left the place, he believed, when she married. But really there had been so many in those days.

"'And her name?' said Jack in a quiet voice.

"'Well, I always used to call her Molly,' answered the rink instructor, twirling his moustache.

"'She had a sister, I believe,' went on Jack.

"'Yes—an elder sister. But no go in her—you can take it from me. That was where the joke lay—Molly using her cloak whenever she came to me.'

"'Thank you,' said Jack heavily, rising to go.

"'Don't mention it,' remarked the other. 'Those were the days, those were. Nothing doing in this line, believe you me. Will you come and have a tiddley?'

"No—he would not have a tiddley. Nor would he take that smirking little swine and batter in his head as he had once battered in a German's during a trench raid. After all, *he* was not the principal culprit. That honour lay elsewhere.

"He thought things over quietly and dispassionately—did Jack. There was no particular hurry—now. At times it seemed almost incredible that such a sacrifice could have been accepted even by a girl like Molly. It was almost too amazing to be conceivable, even taking into consideration the unique position she had occupied in her family. Of course there were still details to fill in, small points which were obscure. It was just within the bounds of possibility that there might be something he didn't know which would palliate

this monstrous thing. So he determined to make quite sure ; he determined to give her every chance. He went to see her at the palatial country house where she now lived. By the way, did I mention that her husband was a peer of the realm—an earl, to be exact ? "

The fair-haired man drew in his breath with a sharp hiss and for the first time, I think, the other men realised that more than just a mere story was being unfolded. I know Murgatroyd was fidgeting in his seat, and Scott had a worried look on his face.

" He was ushered into the great lady's presence by a pompous butler, and she seemed to have a little difficulty in recognising him, though the knuckles of her hand on the chair gleamed white as she saw him, and stark fear showed for a moment in her eyes. At length, however, she was graciously pleased to recall to her aristocratic mind this obscure individual from the past, and all the time he just stood there staring at her without speaking a word. And after a while she began to tremble, and blotches showed on her cheeks through the make-up. He knew, and she knew that he knew. Moreover, the callow boy had gone ; in his place stood a dangerous man.

" ' Why do you look at me like that, Jack ? ' she whispered at length.

" ' Because I want to find out if there lives one redeeming feature in your beastly little soul,' he

said quietly. 'At present it doesn't look like it, but I will give you every chance. Why did you let Ruth bear the blame for your rotten intrigue with that rink instructor? Why did you always go to his rooms in her cloak? And don't try to lie to me.'

"At first she tried to bluster, but not for long. She hadn't any excuse, none, save that she was young and stupid. The man had fascinated her, and she had gone to his rooms without thinking of the consequences.

"'In Ruth's cloak,' put in Jack contemptuously.

"Then she'd got engaged—a wonderful match—to her present husband. She'd met him while she was staying away at a friend's house. But even while she was engaged she couldn't give up the rink instructor; she still went to his rooms. And one night she was seen—coming away. It was to Ruth she had rushed—it was to Ruth that she poured out the story. And it was Ruth who had suggested the way out. She was very insistent on that point; she seemed to think it was some excuse. And it was helped by the fact that the kindly persons who carried the story to her father had thought it was Ruth owing to the cloak. Didn't Jack understand, couldn't he see the awful predicament? Any breath of scandal and her *fiancé* might break off the engagement—would break it off. And how could she have known that Jack would take it as he did?

"'Is that all you have to say?' said Jack as she finished.

"'What are you going to do?' she almost screamed.

"'I'm going to commit every word of it to paper, and send it to your husband,' he replied.

"And then she went mad. She implored, she entreated, she went on her knees to him—until something snapped suddenly in his brain. It seemed to him that this was no woman in front of him—but something loathsome and unclean. All the old hatred he had felt for her as a boy came surging back, and with it the face of Ruth, as she had died in his arms. And I think he must have had his hands on her throat for a minute before he realised the fact."

With great deliberation Bulton lit a cigarette, and his glance never wavered from the fair-haired man's face.

"He didn't quite throttle her; though, as you said, sir, like the man in your case, in every way save the actual deed he did. They found her just breathing half-an-hour later, and she was unable to give any description of the man who had done it. Couldn't or wouldn't? I leave you to judge. And is that one of the crimes of violence you would punish by torture rather than by mere hanging?"

For a moment or two there was dead silence; there didn't seem to be anything much to say. For the issue had narrowed down to Bulton and

the fair-haired man ; we were out of the picture, And it was Scott's quick gasp that made me look up.

The fair-haired man was staring over Bulton's head at a woman who was approaching. She was tall and very beautiful—but her face had no soul in it. It was devoid of expression, like the face of a lovely doll.

" Have you heard anything more about the boat, Henry ? " she said languidly, and at the sound of her voice Bulton turned slowly in his chair and looked at her.

And then we knew. Not necessary to watch the sudden ashen cheeks; not necessary to hear the one choked-out word " Jack ! " not necessary even to see three ugly red scars on the white neck—we knew without that. And like a drunken man Henry, Earl of Pyrford, lurched across the room, and went out through the open windows into the African night.

I MET her first in Monte Carlo. She called herself the Comtesse de Gramont, though who the Comte de Gramont was or had been was a matter which was never satisfactorily elucidated. Certainly if he existed he never appeared on the scene: her invariable companion was a fierce-looking maiden lady of doubtful age who rejoiced in the name of Miss Muggleston. And with Miss Muggleston we are not concerned. Beyond stating that she was addicted to Patience and invariably retired early to bed, Miss Muggleston may be dismissed from these pages, with the same completeness as she was, on occasion, dismissed from the presence of her employer.

To say that Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, was beautiful would be banal. There are women whom it is impossible to dismiss as pretty or plain, ugly or beautiful—to place in a sort of well-defined class. She was beautiful undoubtedly—one of the most lovely women I have ever seen, if not *the* most lovely—but that was only the beginning, the least part of her. It is a big claim to make, but I veritably believe that even if she had been as ugly as sin her devilish attraction would have been in no way impaired. Her figure was marvellous:

her clothes unique, and yet exactly suitable for her. Not another woman in a thousand could have worn them: on the Comtesse nothing else was possible. And, finally, she possessed a charm of manner, and a gift of conversation which alone would have been sufficient to keep a dozen men at her side had she wished for them. She did not wish for them—apparently: wherefore the dozen who would have liked to be there grew to a hundred.

I was talking to Tony Graham in the Sporting Club the first time I saw her—and what Tony does not know about cosmopolitan European society is small. There was a general rustling and craning of heads as she entered, and it takes something to cause that in a place where some of the most beautiful women in the world are to be seen nightly. She was dressed in plain black, and a single diamond ornament blazed on her breast. But it was her carriage that made me look at her particularly, and ask the question that a score of other people asked simultaneously. It was completely natural, and yet utterly regal; the walk of a woman who is absolutely sure of herself and supremely indifferent to what any onlookers may choose to say. In fact, as far as she was concerned, there were no onlookers, though there was no trace of conscious superiority on her face. In short, she accomplished one of the hardest things in the world to do better than I had seen it done before.

"Who is she, Tony?" I asked when she had passed.

He chuckled and lit a cigarette.

"Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, my son," he answered, "is her name, and that is the only positive fact that I can tell you about her. And that is only positive in that it is the name to which she answers, and under which her suite at the Paris is registered. There are people who say that she is a left-handed descendant of the Hapsburgs: there are others who affirm that since her father left the Milan in Paris the cooking has deteriorated. You now perceive at her side young Dorset, who doesn't care a damn who she is, as long as he may have the privilege of losing more money on her behalf, out of his already hopelessly encumbered estate. Women, as you may guess, do not love her: save for a dangerous-looking English woman who is doubtless by this time safely in bed, you'll never see one talking to her. Men, on the contrary, talk to her just as much as she will let them—which varies considerably and very capriciously. She fails, as far as I can see, to conform to the generally accepted rules of her type. For instance, there was a most delightful fellow here last year—Indian Cavalry, on leave. I forget his name—but if you're curious you'll see it up in the cemetery."

"What's that?" I cried, sitting up suddenly. Once Tony gets started, no one who knows him

listens very much: you know he'll go on quite happily.

"Cemetery, I said," he continued. "He blew out his brains. Lived in her pocket for three weeks, and then killed himself. People said it was losses at the tables; but the boy was hardly ever in here. And that was what I was getting at: she doesn't conform to type. I made inquiries afterwards, and the poor fellow hadn't got a bean beside his pay. And two years of that wouldn't have kept her in face-powder. If she stuck to old Guggenheimer, the Berlin banker, and one or two others of that kidney, I could understand it: if she even ostensibly stuck to them when they were round about it would be easy to fathom. But she doesn't. If the spirit takes her, she'll tell them to go to the devil, and take up some man right under their noses. And they always come back, though, to do her justice, I don't think she would mind if they didn't. In fact, old man, a very remarkable woman."

"You know her, I suppose," I said perfunctorily; my interest in the Comtesse was exhausted.

"Oh! yes: I know her," he answered. "That is to say, I have talked to her occasionally, and sat next her at dinner on one occasion. And, as I said before, she is not *comme les autres*. Far from it."

For a moment or two Tony Graham's face grew serious.

"If I had a son or a dear friend," he went on quietly, "my prayer would be that he never came under her influence. You and I are old stagers, Bill, but a youngster——" He stared in front of him, frowning. "That boy in the Indian Cavalry wasn't the first—not by any means. There was an Englishman at Biarritz some time ago, and a young American in Rome. And others."

I gently touched his foot.

"Look out, Tony: she's coming over here."

He glanced up and rose to his feet as the Comtesse passed. She held out her hand with a gracious smile, and Tony brushed it with his lips.

"My luck," she murmured, "is atrocious. Be a saint, my friend, and order me an orangeade."

He gave the order, and then with a faint smile he introduced me.

"I was just telling Lord Telford that your luck is usually very good," he remarked, and for a while we talked on systems and their utter futility. Most certainly Tony was right over one thing: she was not *comme les autres*. As well as being the best-dressed, she was easily the most *distinguée* woman in the room, and it was difficult to believe that some of the things he had told me were not exaggerated. Round such a woman, stories would be bound to gather, and Tony was the most chronic gossiper of my acquaintance. And yet for him he had been singularly serious. . . .

Fate decrees these things, I suppose. First my idle curiosity, then her wish for something to drink, and then young Peter Carruthers suddenly arriving. Is it all blind chance, or is there an ordered scheme of things leading to some definite end? If she hadn't wanted an orangeade, the probability is they would never have met, and if they hadn't . . . Lord! but it's a funny world.

"Hullo! Sir," I heard a cheery voice at my elbow. "What are you doing in these gilded haunts of vice?"

"It's you, is it, Peter," I said, looking up. "I thought you were ski-ing down avalanches at Wengen or somewhere."

"Just come from there," he answered. "Had the most glorious sport."

And as he spoke, his eyes were fixed on the Comtesse, who was talking to Tony Graham.

"I say, sir," he whispered, "you might introduce me, would you?"

Into my mind flashed Tony's remark, but it was impossible to refuse, more especially as at that moment she turned and spoke to me. She acknowledged the introduction with a charming smile, and waved him to a seat beside her, into which Peter dropped with alacrity.

He was an extraordinary good-looking boy—the very best type of Englishman—and, that evening with his face tanned by the Swiss mountain

air, he was just about as perfect a specimen of young manhood as one could well imagine. His father was one of my oldest friends, and young Peter himself I had known since he was born. Six months before he had been married to a girl I had never seen, and, being abroad at the time, I had not been able to attend the ceremony. But I gathered from what his father had written me that she was charming, and just the right sort for Peter.

At the moment, however, she seemed a little out of the picture, which consisted exclusively of the Comtesse. Apparently she had long wanted to try winter sports, and, short of trying them, a detailed description of their joys and difficulties by Peter was the next best substitute. She got it—for ten minutes: then she rose. To-morrow he must tell her more. Assuredly he would: there was nothing which would give him greater pleasure. And was it my imagination, or was there a strange gleam of triumph in the eyes of Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, as she left us?

"What a perfectly stunning soul," said Peter ecstatically after she had disappeared. "Who is she?"

"A collector of specimens," answered Tony Graham quietly. "You'd better be careful, young feller: too much of that lady ain't good for the soul."

"How's your wife, Peter?" I asked, as I saw

him flush a little angrily. "It was a great disappointment for me that I couldn't attend your wedding."

"She's fine, sir, thank you. I was forgetting you'd never seen her. She went back a week ago from Wengen—sister getting married or something—so I thought I'd barge down here for a day or two on the way home."

"When are you going back?" I asked.

"Oh! shortly," he answered vaguely. "Depends rather. Well, I think I'll push along over to the old pub. I'm feeling a bit weary. Goodnight, sir. See you to-morrow."

With a nod to Tony Graham he was gone, and for a while we sat in silence. And it wasn't until we parted for the night that the subject was alluded to again.

"Get that boy away to-morrow, Bill, if you can," he said. "By the milk train at crack o' dawn, if there is such a thing."

He laughed a little mirthlessly.

"There's going to be trouble if you don't. The poor devil is hooked already."

"Rot, Tony," I said. "You've got the damn woman on the brain. The boy is only just married."

But it wasn't rot, and I knew he was right even as I was answering him. Young Peter was hooked, and he didn't even struggle. He seemed to be hypnotised by her during the next two or three days: it was pitiful to watch. He was for

ever with her—lunching, walking, dining; and at length I made up my mind to have a talk to him. After all, though he was twenty-nine, he was almost like a son to me: and though it's ticklish work butting in on things of that sort, it struck me pretty forcibly that it was just a plain duty.

I cornered him one morning just before lunch at Ciro's. I guessed he was waiting for her, so the time was not propitious. But as it was the first time I'd seen him alone for two days the opportunity had to be taken.

"Look here, young fellow," I said, "how much longer is Monte Carlo going to have the pleasure of your company?"

He got a bit red in the face.

"Oh, I dunno, sir," he stammered. "Haven't really thought about it."

"Then it's about time you began," I said. And then I let him have it straight from the shoulder. "It's not playing the game, Peter, for you to go on monkeying round with the Comtesse de Gramont, while the girl you've just married is waiting for you in England. Cut it out, boy; the woman is rotten to the core."

It wasn't till then I realised how far it had gone. He drew himself up very straight and stared at me.

"Only the fact, Lord Telford, that you are considerably older than myself and a friend of my father's prevents me hitting you in the face. So

I will content myself with requesting you to go to the devil." And then he added, with a sort of suppressed fury: "How dare you say such a thing of Paula?"

Well, that didn't help much—distinctly otherwise, in fact. I talked it over with Tony Graham, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"'A rag and a bone,' Bill," he said. "The old story. And you might as well talk to her about it as to that palm tree. She's got him—she's going to keep him, and when she's finished with him she'll throw him away like the core of an eaten apple."

"I think I'll write to his father," I said. "Not that old Jim can do any good, but he'd take it hard if he thought I hadn't let him know."

So I wrote to Jim Carruthers that night, and four days later he arrived in Monte Carlo. He came straight up to my room, and I told him all the facts of the case as far as I knew them.

"It's a bad case, Jim," I said, "a real bad case. She's got him absolutely under her thumb. He's infatuated! He's mad about the woman. I've done what I can, but he cuts me now when he meets me. You see I told him what I thought of her. Honestly, it's not the boy's fault; she's enough to turn any man's brain."

"I must talk to him," he said, heavily. "Get him home somehow. Poor little Ruth suspects something already. You see he hasn't written her

—not a line. And when she heard I was coming here, she wanted to come too. Had the devil of a job preventing her." Suddenly he shook his fist across the sunlit bay. "Curse this foul woman."

A couple of hours after I met him on the terrace. He seemed to have aged, and I guessed what had happened.

"Useless, Bill," he almost groaned. "Absolutely useless. Told me frankly that he'd made a ghastly mistake in marrying Ruth, and that though he was frightfully sorry for her he wasn't going to make the still more ghastly mistake of going on living with her. That this cursed woman was the only woman in the world for whom he could ever care; that she was his soul mate and a lot of other truck of that sort."

He stared out to sea and his face was grey.

"Oh, God, Bill," he muttered, "that Peter should do this thing. For he'll take it hard—my boy will, when she's finished with him and he finds her out for what she really is."

"But is he intending to marry her, Jim?" I asked. "Divorce and that sort of thing. Is that his idea?"

"It's his idea right enough," he said bitterly. "But whether it is hers or not is a very different matter."

And from what I knew of the lady's past history, it certainly wasn't, though I didn't tell him so.

Three days after Jim arrived, Peter left and with

him the Comtesse de Gramont. They had given no indication that they were going, and Peter had not even said good-bye to his father. In fact, it was several hours before we found out that they had left in the morning for Taormina, in Sicily.

Old Jim was distracted. He felt, I think, that while he was in the same place with them he could more or less keep an eye on the situation, which was absurd but understandable. And his first thought was to follow them immediately. It was Tony Graham who dissuaded him.

"What's the use?" he pointed out. "You can *do* nothing, my dear fellow. And it's only torturing yourself unnecessarily. Take it from me, Carruthers, there is only one cure in a case of this sort—time. When it's over, then will be the moment to try and mend things up a bit. And not at once even then. The boy will be like a wounded animal for a while: he'll want to hide himself."

And so the three of us waited on. What exactly Jim wrote to the girl I don't know, but if she'd suspected before she must have known by this time. And then suddenly one morning I saw it in the *Continental Daily Mail*. It danced in front of me, that stunning, paralysing paragraph, so that for a while I could scarcely read it:—

"SHOCKING TRAGEDY AT TAORMINA."

"A dreadful tragedy took place last night in

the celebrated ruins of the Greek Theatre at Taormina. It seems that a young Englishman had climbed to the top of the ruins, which, on the western side are some thirty to forty feet high, and in the darkness must have missed his footing. The drop here is sheer, and the unfortunate gentleman was killed instantly by the fall. He has been identified as Mr. Peter Carruthers."

I thought Jim would go mad when at last he'd grasped the fact. He idolised Peter, who was an only child as well as an only son. Nothing would persuade him that it was an accident; it was merely the influence of that vile woman. She'd driven his boy off his head, and in a moment of insanity he'd killed himself. And so thought Tony Graham and I, though we didn't say so.

The one thing to do was to prevent Jim making a fool of himself, and stirring up some scandal, which would make matters worse. Nothing he could do would bring the poor lad back to life again: nothing he could do would punish the woman as she deserved. It was difficult to make him see it: the poor old chap was beside himself with grief. I think if Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, had crossed his path, he'd have strangled her with his own hands—Jim who would as soon have thought of lifting his hand to a woman as he would of kicking a sick child.

But she didn't. When we arrived—he and I—

at Taormina, she had gone. And Jim was calmer by then. He looked twenty years older, but he did all the necessary formalities with a stiff upper lip.

They were sympathetic, were the authorities. "A terrible thing for the signor: incredible how it could have happened. But undoubtedly an accident—oh, yes, undoubtedly. In the dim light. A false step. . . . Terrible. . . ."

But one thing Jim and I did do before he took his dead back to England: we climbed to the spot where it had happened. It was a large flat bricked floor some five yards by five yards, close by the custodian's house. There were two of these spaces. No one could have *accidentally* walked off the edge, any more than one accidentally walks off a railway platform on to the line.

For a while Jim stood there looking with unseeing eyes across the town towards snow-capped Etna. And then he turned to me.

"Some day, Bill," he said, "my boy will be avenged. I don't know when, and I don't know how, but it will come."

Without another word he walked back to his hotel, and shut himself in his room. And the next day he left.

* * * * *

Three years later I came back from the East. A wanderer from birth, I was homesick for England, but my brother, who was commanding one of the battalions in Malta, persuaded me to break my

journey there. The tragedy of young Peter Carruthers had faded from my mind, and it wasn't until I was dressing for dinner and saw through my window the snow peak of Etna, rising ghost-like from the sea away to the north, that it came back to me. Where, I wondered, was the Comtesse de Gramont? Had there been others who followed Peter's example, and that of the man in the Indian Cavalry? What of old Jim, and the girl whom Peter had married?

And then at mess came the amazing answer to at least one of those questions. The Second-in-command had just returned from eight days' leave at Taormina, where his mother was spending a few weeks. It was he who told me the Comtesse de Gramont was there too. Damned attractive woman: all the old dears in the hotel buzzing like a swarm of bees whenever they saw her. A trifle chutney, he opined, but extraordinarily good-looking. Did I know her by any chance? Yes—slightly, and the conversation dropped.

What a staggering coincidence, I thought, as I undressed that night. And then and there I decided to alter my plans. Instead of going on to Marseilles, I too, would go and stop at Taormina. There was a boat next day to Syracuse, and when I announced my intention of catching it, a twinkle appeared in the eyes of the Second-in-command.

"A charming place," he said, thoughtfully. "You know it—er—slightly, don't you, Sir?"

"Wrong, Johnny," I answered. "Quite wrong. But have it your own way."

And so I met the Comtesse de Gramont for the second time. She was dining at a table not far from mine, and she had her back to me. With her was a much younger woman—quite pretty, but simply dressed. One of those people whom you dismiss as a nonentity, but quite a nice little thing in her way. A new companion I decided: presumably Miss Muggleston had been replaced.

And now as I went through my solitary dinner, I began to wonder what had really brought me there. Idle curiosity—the coincidence—what? And if she recognised me as she probably would, what was I to say? How should I meet her?

To be friendly with her was out of the question—and yet one must preserve the conventionalities. Peter's death had been accepted as an accident: on the surface the matter was closed. To reopen it would be a stupid solecism, and could lead to nothing except unpleasantness. Whatever one may think, the world demands a certain measure of acting. . . .

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Comtesse push back her chair, and as she passed my table I became engrossed in the dangerous task of eating spaghetti in a manner suitable for public view. And so, somewhat naturally, she failed to recognise me, which was what I wanted. I was still doubtful what line to take when we did meet.

In fact, the more I thought of it the more did it seem to me that my sudden whim to come there had been a foolish one. I decided I would catch the Rome express the next day, and until then keep out of her way.

And so after dinner I lit a cigar and went for a stroll. Almost unconsciously my steps led me through the narrow paved main street towards the ruins of the Greek theatre. The last time I had walked that street had been with Jim, and my mind was full of him as I climbed the steps towards the ruins. Poor old chap! Broken up, I supposed, completely. And that dear wife of his! God! it's a cruel thing to lose your all as they had done. And in such a rotten way, too.

I sat down on a big smooth boulder to finish my cigar. Below me the lights of Giardini twinkled round the shore of the bay; in front—on the top of Etna—a faint glow of pink showed up against the night. From the village close by came the sounds of a flute and a woman singing, and I wondered if it was just such a night three years ago when Peter had thrown in his hand. Black and sharp-cut above me to my left I could see the theatre. They liked tragedy—the Greeks: but had they ever staged a grimmer one in their theatre when it stood, than that which had been enacted in its ruins?

And even as the thought flashed through my mind it happened. To this day it staggers me as I

think of it. There was one terrified agonising scream, and something fell from the top of the theatre. Then a dull crash—not twenty yards from where I sat—and silence.

For a moment I sat stupefied ; then I got up and rushed to where the thing lay. I could see it sprawling on the white stone—motionless. It was a woman, and before I got to her some premonition told me the truth.

" I don't know when, I don't know how, but it will come."

It had. Paula, Comtesse de Gramont, lay dead at my feet on the same spot that Peter Carruthers had died three years before.

A terrified girl appeared from inside the theatre suddenly. I looked at her, and it was the companion I had noticed at dinner.

" Mon Dieu ! Monsieur," she cried, " what has happened ? Is she dead ? "

" She is dead," I answered gravely. " You are her companion ? "

" Yes," she nodded. " But how terrible. The Comtesse was standing on the edge watching the view, and suddenly she seemed to sway. And before I could get to her she gave a dreadful scream and disappeared."

I pacified her as best I could, and told her I would inform the police.

" Your evidence will be wanted," I said, " but don't worry yourself. It will only be a formality."

It was only a formality, but during the next few days I wondered mightily. I am not a superstitious man, and yet there are more things in heaven and in earth. . . . The old tag. Had some strange power come out of the darkness to force that woman to her doom? Did she see, as she stood there, Peter beckoning to her, or standing at her side compelling her to do even as she had made him do?

Jim had no doubts upon it.

"I told you so," he said gravely, as I sat with him after dinner a fortnight later, at his place in Sussex. "I don't profess to account for it, but it must be more than a mere coincidence, Bill. The same place exactly: the same death. Remorse, perhaps; if such a devil as that woman was could feel such a thing. But nothing will ever convince me that some power outside our ken was not at work to cause her death."

For a while we talked, and it seemed to me he must be right. He'd aged dreadfully had the dear fellow: things didn't seem worth while any longer. In fact, all he and his wife had left now was Ruth—Peter's widow—and that wasn't the same thing.

"She's a sweet girl, Bill," he said. "You've never seen her, but she's coming home to-morrow."

"Has she been living here ever since it happened?" I asked.

"No," he answered, "she's been away for a year. She wanted to travel, and both Nell and I thought

it would do her good. Of course, we'll lose her some day—we can't be selfish, but we've made her feel that this is her home as long as she wants it."

"And has she any idea of what happened?" I asked.

"Good heavens! No, old man," he cried emphatically. "She thinks it was just an accident. Why, I don't suppose that Ruth has any idea that women like that woman even exist. She's very far from being one of these modern products. I wouldn't have her know the truth for the world. She was suspicious at first, of course, but I succeeded in setting her mind at rest. A dear girl: I'm glad you're going to meet her at last."

And the next day I met Ruth Carruthers—but it wasn't a case of at last. She came across the garden towards me, and for a space we stared at one another in silence. For Ruth Carruthers was the terrified girl who had rushed out from the ruins of the old Greek theatre in Taormina, just after the Comtesse de Gramont had fallen from the top: Ruth Carruthers was the companion who had replaced Miss Muggleston.

"It was stupid of me not to realise," she said steadily, "that the Lord Telford of Taormina was the Bill Telford, Dad so often talks about. But it didn't occur to me somehow."

"Good God! my dear child," I cried, "explain I'm completely dazed."

"And yet it's very easy," she said quietly. "But

I will explain, and when you've heard my explanation, you must take what steps you think fit. You were with Dad, weren't you, when Peter killed himself ?"

I started slightly, but said nothing.

"Of course, those two old dears think that I thought it was an accident. They didn't know that I had a letter from Peter, written the day he did it. I burnt that letter months afterwards, but I know it by heart. It was a ghastly letter—smudged and incoherent. It was a terrible letter written from the depths of Peter's tortured soul. He admitted everything to me : he hid nothing, he pleaded no excuse. He merely said that a power stronger than his own had taken possession of him, and that unless she would marry him he was going to kill himself. And then there was something about my divorcing him."

She stared across the garden towards the old house.

"I was furious at first," she went on. "It seemed so despicably weak. To sacrifice all this for what seemed to me to be merely a passing passion. And I was hurt—bitterly hurt. I dried up—something inside me was killed. And then as time went on the anger left me ; the pitiful side of that letter grew uppermost in my mind. And with pity for him there grew a deadly, overmastering hatred for that woman. At first it was purposeless. I just hated her. And then little

by little it crystallised into the determination to make her suffer, even as she had made Peter. How I was to do it I hadn't an idea, but sooner or later I was going to do it.

"It was about this time last year that the opportunity came. The Comtesse de Gramont was advertising for a companion. She was in London, and it seemed to me that here was my chance. I answered the advertisement in person, and my luck held. She engaged me under another name, and I told them here that I was going to travel."

Once again she paused, and I didn't interrupt her.

"I don't think, Lord Telford," she went on after a while, "that it would be possible for me to explain to you the manner of woman she was. Before men she kept up a certain restraint: before me she kept up none. It was partly my fault, because, at times, I used to apparently sympathise with her in order to be quite, quite sure. She was the cruellest devil that the mind of a novelist has ever conceived of, in fact, if you put that woman's character as I knew it in a book no one would believe you. She wasn't particularly immoral in the accepted sense of the word, her one passion in life was to get men raving mad about her and then turn them down with the shrug of a shoulder and a bored sneer. I tell you, Lord Telford," she cried passionately, "there have been times when I have had to exercise all my self-

restraint not to smother her face with vitriol. She was a fiend—without heart, without pity, without remorse.

"But I waited. There was no hurry, and I had made up my mind what to do. I dropped out hints about my longing to see Sicily; I said I'd heard of the wonderful beauty of Taormina. And one day she suddenly decided to go there.

"'A beautiful place, my little one,' she remarked. 'And one day, when we are there, I will take you to the Greek theatre and tell you a story that will amuse you.'

"My heart was thumping so that I thought she must hear it, but I merely smiled and thanked her. And so we come to the night that it happened. We went out after dinner, and walked to the ruins. I knew what was coming, but now that the moment had actually arrived I felt quite calm.

"'That story you promised to tell me, Comtesse,' I reminded her. 'I am full of curiosity.'

"She laughed. Have you ever heard her laugh, Lord Telford, when she was being natural? It was the essence of refined cruelty expressed in a sound. And thus did she laugh that night high up in the old Greek theatre.

"'A story, my dear,' she said, 'but not a new one. Merely a man—and a rather stupid man. But then they are all that. This one was rather good-looking, but a dreadful bore. Peter something or other—I've forgotten his name. And he

wearied me. He was so dreadfully serious. He had some absurd wife in England, I think—and would you believe it, he wanted me to run away with him and marry him. He was most insistent about it. In fact, it was on this very spot that he went down on his knees and became positively crude. Of course I mentioned the dear non-existent Comte—my devoted husband—and pointed out that as we were Roman Catholics, divorce was out of the question.

"'He grew very white, and then the really thrilling thing happened. He said he'd throw himself off the top here unless I came away with him—divorce or no divorce. It was better than a play, and to help him on I laughed in his face. My dear, he did it: right in front of my eyes. Was killed instantly. Luckily there was no one about, and so I got back to my hotel without anyone knowing I'd been here all the time. Carruthers—that was his name. I remember now. It must have been quite a shock to the absurd wife.'

"'It was,' I said. 'So she became a companion to you, Comtesse, and now she laughs in your face.'

"She was standing near the edge, Lord Telford, when I seized her. And she gave one scream. Then she disappeared—and the rest you know. I acted, of course. I had to. But it was all cut and dried in my mind. And if it hadn't—by some strange freak of fate—been you. . . ."

She broke off and sat staring at me.

"You two made friends?" Jim's voice hailed us from across the lawn. "Mum wants to talk to you, Ruth, and hear about your travels."

Without a word Ruth Carruthers rose and went indoors, and Jim took her vacant chair.

"Good girl, isn't she, Bill," he said. "By the way, I wouldn't mention the fact of that woman's death. The coincidence of the place might bring things back to her."

"Precisely," I murmured. "I won't."

No one would have noticed him particularly as he walked along Piccadilly. He had on a blue lounge suit; his collar was spotlessly white. And he walked with a curious, slow deliberation which betokened the man in no hurry. In the midst of the hurrying, jostling crowd he was just an inconspicuous unit.

Had anyone working in one of the offices high above the street taken the trouble to follow this particular unit's movements he would have come to the conclusion that he was one of the band of leisured idlers who have nothing better to do than to stroll along the streets when the spirit moves them and look at the shops. More than likely this hard-working spectator would have envied him as he returned to his books and ledgers.

For this inconspicuous unit was undoubtedly a most pronounced shop-looker. Every twenty yards or so he would pause and, leaning a little forward on his stick, stare into a window. Tobacconists, hosiers, Cook's office, all came alike to him; his tastes were evidently catholic. But there was one thing which the watcher from his distant point of observation would have been unable to see: a little thing—and yet such a big one. This

idle lounger had a strange method of examining the goods so temptingly displayed. His eyes were tight shut.

For ten or perhaps twenty seconds he would stand there while the midday traffic of London rolled unceasingly by; then, opening his eyes again, he would resume his stroll. Grey eyes they were—steady and indomitable, with a wonderful glint of humour behind them. His face was clean-shaven and good to look at, though to a doctor it might have seemed altogether too thin and fine-drawn.

He passed the Piccadilly Hotel, and once more became apparently engrossed in a shop window. This time it was a jeweller's, but the man was quite unaware of the fact. All he was aware of was that the roar of the motor-buses appeared to be coming from a great way off, and that everything seemed strangely unreal. There was a buzzing in his head, as if wheels were spinning round, and his knees felt weak. With an effort he pulled himself together; he'd never fainted in his life before, and it wouldn't do to start now. Somehow or other he'd got to get as far as King Street in Covent Garden.

He walked on, his head thrown back and a faint smile round his lips. As usual there was a block at Piccadilly Circus, and he paused for a moment by an open Rolls-Royce. A girl was driving, and by her side sat a man whose back seemed vaguely

familiar. And it was just as he got abreast of the man that someone jostled him, and he stumbled and nearly fell. He lurched up against the side of the car, but recovered himself at once with a word of apology, only to see the man lean forward with a positive shout of joy.

"Bill Carruthers, by all that's holy! Bill—you old blighter, how are you? My sister Joyce."

The man on the pavement took off his hat, and the girl looked at him with a friendly smile.

"I've heard such a lot about you from Tom, Mr Carruthers, that I feel I know you already."

But Tom Caldwell was speaking again.

"Lunch, Bill; you must! Look here, we must get on; we're blocking the traffic. Where are you going now?"

"To a place in King Street," answered the other.

"Hop in the back; we'll take you there. And then—lunch. I insist."

He opened the door and half forced the other man in, and the next moment the car was gliding towards Leicester Square. And again the sense of unreality came over Bill Carruthers. Subconsciously he realised that the girl drove with the sure touch of an expert, but his brain was foggy and dull at one moment and full of freakish fancies the next. Like fever dreams; only Carruthers had no fever.

"What number, old man?" Tom's voice

roused him, and he sat up with a jerk. Of course; he'd come to King Street in Tom Caldwell's car Really—this would never do; the luxury of woolgathering would never do for him. He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and produced a slip of paper.

"430 D. It's a warehouse of sorts."

Joyce Caldwell drove slowly along and stopped before the door.

"Hurry up, old man," said Tom. "And then we'll go off and make an oyster or two wilt."

Brother and sister watched him cross the pavement and go through the swing doors.

"Dear old Bill! Fancy running into him like that." Tom lit a cigarette. "The last time I saw him was at the Divisional dinner three years ago."

"What is he doing now?" asked his sister.

"The Lord knows. Clever chap; probably making a fortune."

"For a man who is making a fortune," said the girl, quietly, "his clothes are a bit shabby."

"What damned rot!" cried her brother, indignantly. "His clothes are perfectly all right What's the matter with them? And anyway—even if they were threadbare—what's that got to do with it? Bill's one of the salt of the earth; apart altogether from the trifling fact that he saved my life." He looked at the girl with growing wrath. "If you don't want to lunch with us, because his clothes aren't all you fancy, he and I will lunch alone."

She turned her head and looked at him. And it was only when a man saw Joyce Caldwell full face that he could realise her unique and wonderful charm. It lay in her expression rather than in any particular beauty of feature, and as she looked at her brother he understood, not for the first time, the cause of the relays of men who always surrounded her.

Just now that expression reminded him of a mother tolerantly reproving her young and foolish offspring.

"You were always a fool, Tom," she said, calmly. "And lately I have noticed symptoms of your becoming a damned fool."

Then she leaned forward on the steering wheel and stared down the street, while her brother made explosive noises in his throat beside her.

"Well, anyway," he said at length, "will you lunch or will you not?"

"Of course I shall lunch," she answered. And then she added, with apparent irrelevance, "I think he's got the bravest eyes of any man I've ever met—and the proudest."

The swing door opened again, and Bill Carruthers came across the pavement.

"Finished, old man?" cried Tom.

"Quite," said the other, with a grave smile. "The interview was most decisive."

"Splendid! Then pop in again and we'll tackle this matter of lunch. Where shall we go?"

"The Milan grill," said his sister, quietly, and let in the clutch.

Tom raised his eyebrows.

"I thought you loathed the bally place. The last time you went there you said you'd never seen so many gluttonous human beings in your life."

She swung the car into the Strand.

"Perhaps they will be better to-day. And, by the way, Tom, don't order any cocktails before lunch."

"Not have a cocktail?" he gasped. "When I've only just met Bill? But—why not?"

"Because they're not at all good for anybody in Lent," she answered. "Don't ask questions, old man; do what I say. We'll leave the car in Waterloo Place."

A few minutes later they entered the Milan grill.

"Go and get a table, Tom," said the girl. "And hurry up about it; I'm most frightfully hungry. A nice corner one, where we can talk." She sat down as her brother departed and smiled at Carruthers. "I am so glad to meet you. Tom used almost to bore Dad and me with his panegyrics on a man we didn't know."

"A dreadful exaggerator is Tom," answered Carruthers.

"When a man saves another man's life a little exaggeration is allowable."

"It was nothing," said Carruthers, simply.

"Had the positions been reversed, he would have done the same for me."

He swayed suddenly in his chair, and gripped the table in front of him. His eyes were closed, and the buzzing in his head grew louder. Then it passed and he glanced quickly at the girl. But she had noticed nothing and he heaved a sigh of relief. To be asked if he was ill or anything like that would be more than he could stand. This utterly adorable girl—dear old Tom—it was out of the question that they should ever know. And though few people pray in the Milan grill—yet a strange prayer went up at that moment. . . .

"Dear God! let me eat like a gentleman."

And the man who prayed was Bill Carruthers.

"I've got a table, old thing," came Tom's voice. "And I've ordered lunch."

"What have you ordered?" said his sister.

"A few oysters; a bird; some pêches Melba, and a bottle of bubbly."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, Tom, go and cancel it," remarked the girl. "I want a full-size porterhouse steak, with fried potatoes and all sorts of vegetables. And before that, to get on with at once, an omelette. You and Mr. Carruthers can please yourselves. I'm hungry."

"Hungry!" gasped Tom. "Why, great heavens, my dear woman, you must be up the pole. It takes three men to lift one of their porterhouse steaks."

"Splendid!" said the girl. "That's just what I feel like. What about you, Mr. Carruthers?"

"Well, really, I feel rather like it myself," answered Carruthers, forcing a smile.

"Then there you are, Tom," said his sister. "Two full-size porterhouse steaks, and two omelettes. And you can have your oysters and your bird. And let us know as soon as the omelette is ready."

Slightly dazed, her brother retired again to the grill-room, to countermand his original order, leaving the other two outside. And suddenly the girl gave an annoyed exclamation. She was peering into the inner recesses of one of those mysterious feminine bags, and then she looked up at her companion.

"How aggravating!" she cried. "I've left all my change at home. Could you give me some silver for a ten-shilling note?"

A dull red stained Carruthers' cheeks, and he fumbled in his pockets.

"I—er——" he began, but the girl had opened a new compartment with an air of relief.

"It's all right," she said. "My mistake. It was here all the time."

She wasn't looking at him, and the red died slowly down, leaving him whiter than ever. What an escape! What a merciful escape!

He made some humorous remark concerning the

intricacies of these indispensable abominations, but it seemed to fall flat. At any rate, she made no answer—only went on fumbling with her bag.

"You fool," ran her thoughts, "you stupid fool! Didn't you know already without that? Oh! won't that idiot Tom ever come?"

He did at last, wearing a slightly aggrieved expression, and his sister rose at once to her feet.

"Come on," she cried. "I'm simply famishing."

"Well, if you eat that steak, you'll have to hire a crane to lift you out of your chair," said Tom, waxing sarcastic. Events somehow were not turning out quite as he anticipated. No cocktail, no nice lunch, porterhouse steaks—— And Joyce—what the devil was the matter with her? She seemed so quiet, so different to usual. Before Bill, too, of all people.

He dug a fork into an oyster with an air of peevishness; no accounting for girls. And then suddenly he happened to glance across the table at Bill, and the suspicion of a frown appeared on his face. He banished it instantly; he was loyal to the core, was Tom. But Bill's coat sleeve had slipped back a little, revealing his shirt cuff. Well, apart from the fact that the shirt was flannel—after all, fellows did wear grey flannel shirts with single button cuffs presumably, or no one would make the beastly things—apart from that, it struck him that the cuff was not too clean.

He started in heavily on plays. His best friend

couldn't call Tom a brilliant conversationalist, but he had one invaluable asset. What he lacked in quality, he made up in quantity. He burbled serenely on, and his audience could listen or not as they pleased. It made not the slightest difference to them or to Tom.

And on this occasion a vague feeling that all was not quite as it should be spurred him on to dizzy heights. He launched into a completely pointless story which had something to do with a girl and a mashie niblick and the pond hole at Worplesdon. In fact, the only merit in the story was that it was interminable. It lasted well into the porterhouse steak. And at the crucial moment, just as the *bonne bouche* was coming, Joyce interrupted him.

"Tell the waiter to give us some champagne, Tom."

Tom spluttered out like a motor running short of petrol.

"Good Lord! haven't you had any?"

"Not yet," said his sister calmly. "But I'd like some now, and so would Mr. Carruthers."

"My dear old Bill," cried Tom, "forgive me. I apologise; I abase myself."

He signed furiously to the waiter, and then looked quickly at Bill. The old boy looked different, somehow; more like his old self. Coming to think of it, he hadn't looked too fit before lunch; bit washed out and cheap. Morning after the night before sort of business.

"How's the old porterhouse steak, people? Great heavens! old thing"—he gazed at his sister's plate—"you don't mean to say you've lowered it?"

"Very nearly all," she answered.

"Judging by your conversational efforts you must have been pretty busy," said Tom, brightly, "and old Bill's going strong still. Remember those bully stews in France, old man? Gad! how they used to go down. But then one really was hungry."

Bill smiled slightly.

"Extraordinary condition to have been in, wasn't it, Tom?"

"Good old days in some ways and all that," said his host, profoundly. "But it seems to me I've been doing most of the talking. How's yourself, Bill? Haven't been working too hard, have you? Struck me you weren't looking so frightfully fit, don't you know? Doesn't do to overdo it, old man. Why don't you come down and spend a week-end with us? The governor would love to meet you."

Into the grey eyes there came a sudden glint of laughter. Courage had come back, and God alone knew that it had been only just in time. What sudden Heaven-sent whim had caused that glorious girl to decide on a porterhouse steak was beside the point; perhaps it was true that there was a Power who tried a man thus far and no farther.

But he couldn't go and spend a week-end for the very good reason that he'd pawned his evening-clothes two months ago.

"It's very good of you, Tom," he said, gravely. "But I'm too busy at the moment. Later on, perhaps."

"Can't you manage one afternoon away from the office?" asked the girl. "It's such a glorious day, and we could run down there in the car. Then back after dinner."

Bill Carruthers almost laughed. Into his mind there flashed his recent interview with an oleaginous Jew in King Street, and that gentleman's last remark:—

"Get out of my offith, before I kick you out. I've nothing for you."

Kick him out! The little swine—the miserable little swine. He glanced at the girl, and she was looking at him with a strange, grave smile that made his heart miss a beat and then race for two or three. Take a pull, Bill Carruthers; this won't do. Penniless down-and-outers don't count in the social scheme. But she'd never know, and Tom would never know—and, oh, God!—to forget for one day.

"I think I can manage that," he said, quietly. "It's very good of you to suggest it, Miss Caldwell."

"Then let's go at once," she cried. "Pay the bill, Tom; Mr. Carruthers and I will be in the car."

He sat beside her on the way down, with Tom

in the back. She didn't speak much, and, leaning back in his corner, he studied her profile. Once, as if realising his occupation, she turned and looked at him with the same grave little smile on her lips.

"I'm glad you could come, Mr. Carruthers," she said. "I don't think you can realise how much Tom means to Dad, and but for you——"

She left her sentence unfinished, and once more stared at the road in front. And the man by her side lay back in his seat breathing in the peace of the country in spring. He felt like a swimmer who had been battling in heavy seas, and had come at last to calm water. Outside the breakers still seethed and roared; to-morrow he would have to start the weary fight all over again. But to-day was his; just one day of make-believe.

The car swung through two iron gates, and up a long drive towards a big house screened by huge trees. Velvety lawns stretched down to a lake on which two stately swans sailed majestically. It was just a bit of old England—untouched, unspoiled. And there are not many left.

There was no house-party, for which fact Bill Carruthers heaved a sigh of relief. And all through the long, lazy afternoon—warm, by some kindly dispensation, as a day in July—the four of them sat and talked on the terrace overlooking the lake. Make-believe it might be—this courteous, charming, grateful old man; Joyce—he called her

that in his mind just because it was make-believe ; dear old Tom—but how utterly wonderful ! And the minutes flew and the shadows lengthened until a sudden chill little breeze warned them that it was still early spring. So they went indoors, and Tom took him upstairs to wash.

" Ten minutes, old man," he said, as he left him. " And the governor is routing out the vintage port."

He shut the door to find Joyce beckoning to him.

" Come into Dad's study," she said. " I want to talk to you both."

A little surprised, he followed her into the room where his father was already standing in front of the fireplace.

" What's the mystery ? " he inquired, lighting a cigarette.

" During the war," said his sister, quietly, " you may remember that I drove an ambulance in Serbia. And there was one particular thing I saw a good deal of. That thing was starvation. There's no mistaking it."

The two men exchanged a surprised glance ; what on earth was Joyce driving at ?

" To-day, Tom—I saw it again." She gave a little twisted smile, and turned her back on both of them. " Why do you suppose I told you not to have cocktails ? Why do you think I ordered that awful porterhouse steak ? Why, just because he was faint for food : starving. I don't believe he's tasted anything for days."

Tom's honest face slowly turned a deep magenta.

"Rot! bunkum!" he stammered.

"My dear, surely you're mistaken!" said her father, mildly.

"I tell you I'm not mistaken," said the girl, with a little stamp of her foot. "I've seen it too often to be mistaken. I saw it when Tom spoke to him in Piccadilly; I saw it again when he left the car in King Street. Didn't you see the way he walked, Tom? But I wasn't quite sure how bad he was till you were ordering lunch. He nearly fainted outside in the lounge." She swung round facing them. "Starving, Dad, starving; without a copper in his pockets. Don't ask me how I know; I do. And he saved Tom's life. What are we going to do about it?"

"My dear," said her father, helplessly, "I quite agree. What are we going to do about it?"

"Look here, Joyce," said her brother, "are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely," answered the girl.

"But you talked about his leaving the office and all that sort of thing."

"Because you've only got to look in his eyes for one second to realise that he's as proud as Lucifer. If he thought I'd guessed the condition he was in he'd never have come for this run."

"Then it boils down to this: we've got to find him a job, and a good one," said Tom, decisively. "And until we've done that he's got to stop on in

this house. Good heavens!" he went on. "I can't believe it. Bill starving! Why didn't he let me know?"

"Just because of that pride of his, of course. Why did he say he couldn't get away for a week-end on account of work? Because he wasn't going to tell us that he had no clothes to wear. And if he thinks we are offering him a job out of charity, he'll throw it back in our faces."

"Merridew asked me to-day whether I had taken any steps to find a successor for him," interposed her father.

"By Jove, governor—the very thing!" cried Tom. "Don't you think so, Joyce?"

"Well, there's just one point, my dear boy. Does he know anything at all about land agent's work?"

"Does it matter, Dad?" Joyce slipped her hand through her father's arm. "Does anything matter except that the man who saved Tom's life out in France is penniless and starving? We're both rather fond of Tom, you know."

The old man smiled.

"I suppose we are. All right; I'll ask him if he'd care to take it on. Even if he doesn't know anything about it, he can learn. And he struck me as being exactly the type of man I'd like to have for the job."

"He's one of the best," said Tom, simply.

"Do you mind, Dad, if you'd let me lead up to

it ? " said Joyce. " You can come in—you and Tom—at the last moment ; but I think I can do the preliminary part better."

" My dear—I shall be only too delighted," cried her father.

" And, of course, he'll stop here to-night, anyway. As it wasn't arranged, Tom can easily suggest lending him anything he wants. There's the gong. Now, don't forget—not a word, not a hint, of what I've told you."

With a final warning glance at both men she went out into the hall as Bill Carruthers came down the stairs.

" Mr. Carruthers," she said, " would you mind frightfully if we didn't go back to town to-night ? I find there are one or two things I must do here, and Tom can fix you up for the night."

" Of course I can, old boy," said Tom. " Anything you want."

Into Bill Carruthers' mind there flashed a picture of his bed that night if they did go back to town—a seat on the Embankment. Truly Fate was being kind to him for this one day—even if it was make-believe.

" I am in your hands, Miss Caldwell," he said. And then his mouth twitched with an irresistible smile. " I don't think the business will suffer in my absence."

It was dangerous, he knew, but all through dinner he let his thoughts centre on the girl who

sat so gracefully facing her father. It comes quickly to a man sometimes, that blinding certainty that he has met the one woman who matters or ever will matter. And it had come to Bill Carruthers that day. What matter the sheer futility of it ? Nothing and no one could take from him his dreams.

He hardly heard some remark she made to her father ; he was watching a little tendril of hair that had escaped just by her ear. And when she turned to him he had to pull himself together with an effort.

" I beg your pardon," he murmured. " For the moment I was thinking of other things."

" I was wondering if you knew of anyone, Mr. Carruthers, who could take the place of Mr. Merridew—Dad's estate agent ? "

" Merridew is getting on in years," said her father, " and I've got to find a successor somewhere. Six hundred a year and a house."

Six hundred a year and a house ! The words rang in Carruthers' brain. Six hundred a year and a house !

" Would the work be very difficult ? " he heard himself saying.

" Nothing that a moderately intelligent man can't pick up in a year," said his host. " Of course, he must like an outdoor life and be a gentleman."

" Pity old Bill can't take it on himself," said

Tom, cracking a nut. "He loves an outdoor life. Honestly, old man, with your tastes I don't know how you stick the City."

And now temptation was hammering at him. Why not? A job; a country job; a house. And Joyce. To see her sometimes. . . . To speak to her. . . .

"It is hardly likely that such an idea would appeal to Carruthers," said the old man, but he looked at his guest a little questioningly. "Of course, if it should, I need hardly say that there is no man living I would sooner have in the job than the very gallant gentleman who saved Tom's life."

He raised his glass with old-fashioned courtesy towards the man who sat so silently staring in front of him. So it wasn't a make-believe day after all; he wouldn't have to start that awful, weary round again to-morrow. All he had to do was to accept, and put the past out of his mind for ever. After all, he had done nothing to be ashamed of; it hadn't been his fault—these last few months of hell. So why not?

He glanced at the girl, and she was looking at him with a curious intentness. He looked at Tom, and he was lighting a cigarette. He knew the thing was his for the asking; he knew he could do the work. And still he hesitated.

"Accept, you fool," rang a voice in his brains. "Accept at once, and later on you can allude

jokingly to the fact that it was a very fortunate offer for you. Don't give yourself away; don't humiliate yourself needlessly."

Came the answer quiet and insistent: "You're taking a job under false pretences. They think you a successful man. Would they have offered you this thing if they knew you'd even pawned your underclothes?"

And suddenly he hesitated no longer. He turned to his host, and when he spoke his voice was steady.

"You have made me a very wonderful offer, Mr. Caldwell—how wonderful it is you can have no idea. Unfortunately, your offer has been made without a full knowledge of the facts. When Tom and Miss Caldwell saw me in Piccadilly this morning I was on my way to answer an advertisement for a job as a night porter. When I got to the place I found that the post had already been filled; to be exact I was the twenty-fifth unsuccessful applicant. And the Jew I interviewed removed any lingering hope I had that he desired to look at me any longer. Other Jews and employers of labour have been doing the same thing now for five months.

"I'm afraid I was rather at the end of my tether. Until lunch to-day my only food during the last few days has been a bit of bread and the outside rind of an old onion given me on the Embankment some nights ago by a drunken woman. That is why I accepted Tom's offer of lunch. But during lunch I let it be understood by him and

your daughter that I was doing well in the City. That was a lie ; but it never dawned on me that it would have any consequences. Now, of course, things are different. Believing that I was what I said I was, you have tentatively suggested that I should become your estate agent. That has made it necessary for me to tell you the truth. I apologise for not having done so before ; but "—for a moment his voice faltered—" I was looking on this as a day of make-believe. It has given me new hope and strength to carry on. There is only one other thing I'd like to say—it was stupidity and not dishonesty that brought me to my present position. I was swindled out of what money I had."

" You silly old fool—you silly, damned old fool ! " broke in Tom gruffly. " What the devil do you want to tell us that for, when it's obvious to anyone who knew you ? I take it hard, Bill. Why didn't you let me know ? "

" I don't like charity, Tom," said the other, smiling. His eyes came round to the girl, but she had left her chair and was standing by the open window staring out into the garden.

And then the old man spoke.

" I take it hard, too, dear fellow," he said. " Have I no rights at all as Tom's father ? Because you've had bad luck, what has that got to do with the offer I have made you ? "

" But you made it," stammered Carruthers,

" thinking that—thinking that I was—what I said I was."

" No, he didn't," began Tom, eagerly—and then stopped short. Willingly would he have bitten his tongue out—but it was too late. The mischief was done.

" So you knew ? " said Carruthers, quietly. He rose to his feet, and the grey lines had settled on his face again. " I see ; I ought to have guessed. Charity : for saving Tom's life."

" That is unjust and unfair, Mr. Carruthers," said a quiet voice at his elbow. It was Joyce : Joyce with her head thrown back and a wonderful light in her eyes. " It is true that my father knew—I told him. I saw the condition you were in : I've seen starvation too often in Serbia during the war not to recognise it. But to state that Dad has made you this offer out of charity is belittling you and belittling us. You've been to these other men—strangers—asking for work. Had they offered it, would you have said it was charity ? They knew the condition you were in ; men like you don't ask for jobs as night porters for preference. And yet when my father offers you a job you turn it contemptuously down. Presumably you regard it as such a poor one that it's beneath you to accept it."

From behind him came the sound of a closing door, but he was barely conscious of it.

" Great heavens ! Miss Caldwell—you can't

think I meant it that way." He stretched out an imploring hand. "You can't think that I'm such an unspeakable cad as to view your father's wonderful offer like that."

"I'm really not very interested in what you think," she said, coolly. "All I know is that my father has made you a certain suggestion, and that you regard it as charity. If that isn't what you think, all I can say is that you've expressed yourself very badly."

And suddenly something snapped in Bill Carruthers' brain. A continued course of starvation wears the human mechanism out to snapping point, and that point had come to him. He broke down and cried like a child—his face buried in his hands. And with infinite tenderness in her eyes she watched him even as she had watched other men cry just because they had dropped a knife on the floor or something equally trivial.

Tom's face appeared for a moment at the window, and she signed to him imperatively to go away. Then she waited, being the manner of a girl who has learned many things in the book of life. And after a while the shaking shoulders grew still, and he looked up at her.

"So that was why you ordered a porterhouse steak?"

"Of course," she answered, with a smile. "And a jolly good steak it was!"

He stood up facing her.

"I'm not going to apologise for making a fool of myself," he said, quietly. "I would to most people—but not to you. I think you're the most wonderful girl I've ever met. And because you're that, you'll understand what I'm going to say. It's not due to weakness; and, believe me, it's not impertinence. It is a statement of fact, as unalterably true as the fact that we are together in this room. Six hours can sometimes mean as much—aye, more—than six years. In these six hours—nine, to be accurate—since I first met you, I have learned the meaning of the word love. There will never be another woman in my life except you. And that is the real reason why I cannot accept your father's offer, though naturally that is not the reason I shall give him. I shall tell him that I don't know enough of the work to feel justified in accepting. But I want you to know the truth. And above all I want to thank you for doing what no other girl in the world could have done for me to-day—saved me from cracking, when the end was very near."

She had stood very still as he spoke, and her eyes had never wavered from his.

"Then you intend to return to London to-morrow?" she said, as he finished.

"If you'll be good enough to take me in the car," he answered. "I'm afraid my finances do not allow of a train fare."

"Nor, presumably, of my doctor's bill."

He stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"My dear man," she remarked, "if I've got to spend the next few weeks eating porterhouse steaks with you, I shall have to go into a home. In fact, I refuse to do it. So I'll just tell Dad you're sorry you were a fool—and you can start with old Merridew to-morrow."

And then, for the first time, her voice shook a little.

"You silly old ass; you dear, silly old ass! Don't you realise that I was never nearer making a fool of myself in my life than when I saw the look on your face after I asked you for change while we were waiting for lunch?"

She went to the door, leaving him staring after her.

"Dad," she called, "Bill's going to take on the job—er—for a time."

"Splendid!" answered her father. "Till he gets something better."

"I rather think that's the way he looks at it," she remarked, demurely. And then she looked at Bill. "Isn't it?"

THE END